

Marcel Ray Duriez

Burning

Interval: 1 A Desire to Burn

‘A writing style of consciousness, that lingers within the subconscious.’

1

‘IT WAS A DESIRE TO BURN,’ coal, and live about were caring about what was underground than above, ever so- softly there was snow falling around. In a light blue twilight in the hills, snaking in the dusk, was a long train pulling coal cars, and on the other track, rushing by in a slower track as a dimly light passenger train, rumbling beside the other with the beam brightly a glow as it goes past.

It was seven A.M. early moorings, and the train had just rounded, ‘The Hours Cover’ just outside Altoona Pennsylvania. 30 miles in the remoteness of the main city, it is small-town life- in the 1920s, the path the train takes are ruthless, and unforgiving- death-defanging at times, and treacherous.

It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, dragged up and pathways carved deep into the hillsides; maiming was life- in a small town. Life and man’s faces blackened with coal dust altered history. With the shovels and outlet in their fists, with this great python like covers, and spitting venomous gasses upon the world out of deep shafts, their blood pounded in their head- and water dripping down backs man are at work, the workingman’s hands were the hands of some amazing conductor playing all the symphonies of blazing and scorching to bring down the rags and coal ruins of history. As the path, the train took to make a town and life within.

The lights and staccato flashes and flickers placating of the nearing town worm glow, the cast of low hanging smoke in the air below- blanked by the covering of ice and snow, nearing as the train grinds down the rails. Yet under the ground was a world to very much alive, with men and their symbolic helmet with the name upon saying- ‘Brane’s and Tucker.’

Blast and sprays of rushing water, and rats, 7 miles out and under, odd above the train, they do not even think about in their 7-hour shift. On his stolid head is the mask of black- and sours from sclauffer- blistering, and his eyes all orange flame with the thought of what came next, looking at the man next to him that holds his life in his hands-

also with the passion to work underground- that has become his life,
like breaded into his nature.

The flicker of a gas lamp is all the light he needs to make a living, the igniter jumped up (fire) in a gorging enthusiasm, (blast) that burned the evening red and yellow and then black- it was a new seam of coal. 'Come on boys load it well it easy, we get paid by the town.'

Everything in the life of small-town life is owned by the company- the home, the store, and even your life was owned by the establishment, work to give them their money back. Slender row homes pack, crammed, a hellish wasteland to some, that was above the ground. Boxes with shingles, a new contraption that makes one feel as if there being a shout from a cannon, called the automobile.

1914, saw some of the first cars, own within these parts. About 6 months into the war, a young man just out of school, that was heading for the mines, ended up on the firing lines. Brakes screech mean jumping train cars, flagman's swinging lanterns, crossing tracks, a car hitting as they were cupelled together, a man in boxcars, all going for the war effort. 'Poor buggers, they're not coming back.' Said, the Engineer, drooping over the window of the engine. The flame of the firebox scorching his face, with the thing that is most substernal to this world, coal.

Whistle scam, one the train, two the shifts at the mines, steam of the name of the game... hurry up and wait. The train has more cars and more cars banging, hitting hard-linked up, everything is hazed and masked with steam, and dim light, another world, to the elders of the town- who are not welcoming the revulsions. Puffing and breathless, the trains are like the workers in their world to that is the only worlds they know, that are not afraid of a little coal dust.

The valley full of autumn-fall color leaves rescaled in the wind of changes. Tons of coal, crossing bypasses- viaducts, and twisting hills, rolling thunder, of still horses, all ones the thing that is most valued coal. Dark weather, glum-looking waters, storms- of fear, hunger, and passion, rivers like the Susquehanna, breaking up what should be paths of least resistance. Valleys and mountains, lights below, town scattered about within.

The Village of McAnulty became Borough 14 within the districts of the purlieu, within the United States. Swarms of fireflies-like hot ash were dumped on the rails before the train left the small green station, one town over.

He wanted above all, like the old joke, to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-

winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.

Church bells clang, babies scream, and live in the town is at the start of rapped swiftness, to the ear-shattering sounds- blowing throughout the valley.

2

Merrill smirked the brutal grin of all men singed and driven back by dust, water, a heat. He knew that when he returned to the above ground, he might glint at himself, an entertainer man, seared corked, in the hand mirror.

Deep in the valley, children are still asleep, and rising, to the down, of a school day, yet- I have been working all night. Night, and day- it is all the same to me, the sun slowly glinting on the church steeples, and the crosses and domes glitter in shimmers.

Later, going to sleep, he would feel the fiery smile still gripped by his face muscles, in the dark- of a man that was truly a man in his world. It never went away, that- beam, it never went away if he thinks of... change.

New things in the town were being added, and old were coming down, it was the superlative of periods, and it was the nastiest. Streetcars of orange started to pull passengers down the main streets, to jobs and nearby shops, wall to wall people, it was... as Merrill could barely keep his eyes open, well on them for the ride home. Gas lamps flicker, slowly going out, to the start of a new day, it was a long ride home, 10 cents one way, leaving 7 for the day of work completed. And the cost of bread was 5 cents. 'Working like a rat- for 2 cents he moaned- to be an old man by the time I am 40.'

The hospital was added on for the fourth time, in less than 10 years. Passing the same things over and over, repetitious. Passing fiery piles of bony, 'useless junk,' he said, along with saying- 'stinking up the neighborhood.'

The low fog was bringing off, to the sun's rays, dry and crisp frigid air, and white wispy smoke streaming from chammy's atop the box-like homes, that were lined up like soldiers in a row- in a tension.

He hung up his black -colored helmet and shined the identification plat with his number 777 on his sleeve, he hung his overalls along with his crusty filthy jacket neatly- under the hat on the

hook by the door of his home- that the mines own; he showered lavishly- in the basement- never- ever getting the dust out of the skin in his hands, or the look of black eyeliner from his eyes, his back scabs, and a long run of blood, down his spine, and then, whistling, hands in pockets, walked across the upper floor- hard old wood, of the home and fell into his bed- his last thoughts were- Reilly No. 1 Mine is opening up tomorrow, with 77 new men, and he is overseeing them all-and the pay is good. And his thought trails off.

At the last moment, when disaster seemed optimistic, he pulled his hands from his pouches of his PJ's, the heels one inch from the end of the mattress. It was the end of a day, and the best part is he and his wife just sighed in the name of love- she streaks into the hall and down to the bath, and then she was not off to tend to the children and be a wife, he was dreaming not about her- but his true first love the coal mine.

3

Merrill is Navaeh's great-great-grandfather, and now that Nevaeh had some time for herself, she thought it was best to go back in time and study her ancestry. This is my home, she thought- yet everything looks so different. Like all men from my homeland, it was coal mines, moonshine, and moving down the line.

And I have so much to prepare between now and then! I need this time thought Nevaeh.

(Back to the present time)

Except when it does not, I feel the most fear- over knowing what next, by them, I always did, and I feel that I always well.

'Anyway, I am leaving soon, just after school gets out.'

'How many times have you graduated now?'

'Ha- it has become an inside joke- with me.' Said Naddalin.

'...And you have kept all your tassels.'

I did not want to say yet this is our last time to be together... I am moving on to a new life.

I do as the locals of the time and try to be part of a place and time that is not fitting for me, funny you should say that that is exactly what your other half is doing at this very moment.

‘Seriously perfect.’ I smile, and the best of it all.
‘Congrats, on making thought yet another 4 years of repetition, it to see what you lost.’

‘It’s all part of the wonderful game!’ Naddalin said.

‘That is so cool. And well deserved I might add. I only wish I could have been there with her now- and see her heritage- you know her roots- after all that village is the town in her story.’

And the moment I say it, I realize it is true- I was missing her, I am happy for her- yet I feel like I am losing yet another person in my life, as she always did, that is because I am partly her now.

‘It would be so nice to escape all my problems; Besides, I miss hanging with her, already.’ She whispered.

(Random thought)

I remember when I had a phrenologist read my head, saying that I was brilliant, I was always special, to that just I sometimes wonder if he was right?

(Deeper thoughts of the moment)

The last few weeks when she and Haven (along with the rest of the school,) were under AVA’s and her blackbird clans’ spells were some of the loneliest days of my life. You can see them flying above the castle when they are transfigured into black cowers. And they peck and stock their party.

Not having Naddalin beside me was more than I could bear- now and even worlds apart too, but not having the care of my two best friends nearly sent me over the edge, also.

Nevertheless, she and Haven did not evoke any of that, none of them doing this to me when she investigated my memories- as she did with the prophecies. Only Naddalin can access small bits and pieces- after all, she is half of me over the fact, she and I have split souls, and what she recalls leaves her feeling- guilty, as I do with her, yet it is what we had to do for immortality.

We stay in youth hostels, backpack around-how cool is this... right for life and beyond? All of us, you know, you and Naddalin, Haven and I, and me and whoever... feels the need to escape when you cannot escape the thoughts in your head, and the visions that play in your mind brought on by them, over souls being linked together.’

‘You and whoever... we meet along the way too...? We will change them into our own and make a militia- to take them down, and we will- in time- the time is everything when the time is everlasting.’ I glanced at her.

‘What is that about? TIME’

‘There is no such thing in our world.’

‘I’m a realist.’ She shrugs, ‘and still keep track of all things related to time.’

‘Oh, come on.’ I roll my eyes. ‘Since when?’

‘Since last night when I found out I’m going back home and starting over, said Emmah, who was not partaking in the war.’

Emmah- ‘I have been through enough, pain and saw far too much by not seeing at all!’

4

She giggles, running a hand through her brown hair.

‘Listen, you all are so-o great and all, don’t get me wrong, yet this is what I must do.’

Nonetheless, I am not fooling myself to think I am not going to be here in spirit.

‘I am not pretending it’s anything more than it is, am I, or well become?’ Said Haven, yet something greater than us if we all stand together.

‘...Woman warriors?’ The question was asked.

It is like we have an expiration date, you know- and we keep having to start over and then find each other to do so, and it is just my time- said Emmah to try over- like all of you, and I know that you have, I will see you again, like- I promise? You guys are different, you are lifer’s afterlife.’

Let us see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end. It is not like with you and Naddalin.

‘Lifers?’ I peer at her, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light. ‘Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- yet that is how girls like us-their lives go.’

‘You know what I mean, don’t you?’

She inspects her shape, turning her hot-pink nails the way and that. ‘It is just that you guys are so in tune with each other, so connected, and I was never part of all this over my un-chosen disabilities, that I no longer have. Said Emmah.

And I mean that literally by the way since you are always going at it.’

Alissa- Still thinks you are a- ‘dumb ass slut!’ along with Alissa- ‘an idiotic tramp!’

Allison- ‘still thinks you’re a lazy crazy no-good bugger.’

Adriane- Still thinks you are a- ‘She is a no-talent hoe-bag!’

Ava- Still thinks you are a- ‘you’re a psycho tart!’ Said Emmah.

‘The world never really changes, even if it expands.’ Said Nevaeh.

Not anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, crossing the intersection with a loud screech of heels stopping for us to go down the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them.

‘Look,’ said Haven, just overhead was an exceptionally low flying massive dark gray jet, is making water vapor, that was changing the weather patterns- and the clement for the year.

The wind whispered as if comforting the cloaked figure that darted in and out of the trees, at us trying to still happiness and joy.

The sky was blackened with the inky night, but little dots of reassuring stars provided some light as it was getting ever so darker and dark to the point of eerie glum. No more than the luminescent blood moon that hung loosely in the sky above. And pink rainfall, splashing about. Also, like blood...

But even after I sat still for a moment to think she was nowhere to be found; Nevaeh vanished. As we were being dreamed of all mummeries and thoughts- and even time stood still.

A rustle and a twig snap broke the silence that enveloped the cloaked figure, and it ran faster all around us inclosing- making them airtight.

As fast as the wind seemed to carry it until finally, it reached the defrayal. Looking into the canopy of trees that masked the depths of the dim forest it set the two parcels well concealed in its cloak on the ground. One the key or life- and wisdom, and the other- the heart-shaped ring of undying stamina and love of others and life even in the darkest of days, just parts to make one most powerful fallen angel, to the point of a god. All the things that belonged to the missing girl! We know it as Nevaeh.

Emmah- I am about to climb a wall in panic, wondering where she could be- as I was about to say my last goodbye, when she appears right beside me putrefied like gruesome death- and I blink- blink and blink once more, her hand in mine the whole time- and rushed in for my heart as it was ripped out of me- for them...

'Emmah,' they all scream as she fads into ash before them all! I think I have blacked out a moment there- said Haven- confused about the events.

Refusing to slow until fear- we ran into a parking lot, and I scanned for Naddalin in the fetal position, who always seems to stare down danger more than us, in a second- she was next to me- more scared than all of us combined.

Then the figure removed the hood that hung over its head to reveal the sorrowful face of a woman, cracked skin that was more than evil- flacking, and palling, eyes black cover over with a hint of milky haze. Bloody fingers of bones reach out to Naddalin's face. With no-where to run... or it would pop up before her asking for her to surrender.

Her light brown hair curtained her face as she crouched on the ground and began pouring the black liquid of ink across the grass, she keeps- keeping creatures like this away.

Yet this was not an average dementor- this was Mazel back from the grave, yet without a full body to call her own. Stilling some of the bones of Lance, the soul of Lily, the mind of Melissa and the heart of Emmah she arose again, like a mixed, fetus making a new child to a grown woman, before them within the darkness of the black curtains- like a flaming stone tower- with the fools she took as her own like within. Stopping at nothing to have eternal life and glory.

Mazel- screamed to them all is- ‘The only true voyage, the only bath in the Fountain of Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see a hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is; and this we do- with talented artists; with artists like these we do fly from star to star, and world to new world.’

An owl hooted within the dark trees of the woods in the background, distracting her only for a second but she continued to move across the clearing, her back hunched with concentration- this she was there for the taking and even the final kill.

She asks, glancing at me and all of them, and slings her backpack over her shoulder. Naddalin nods- and the sparks of powers link up and combine. Powers to powers matched up, almost equal.

‘A hundred and ten more will not stop me.’ Mazel said, as the spark flows- from finger to finger.

Naddalin laughs, as she knows that Naveah is safe in her body and her mind. Even if thoughts of defeat are what she is after.

‘Nevaeh is always smarter, and one step ahead.’ Always- she muttered under her breath.

5

Her hands shifted in position so that her two middle fingers were facing downwards. A burst of light erupted from the hexagon they were now standing within, which was aflame, and the wind blew stronger, causing her whippy spiderweb-like cloak to toss around her- as her wings spread to take the backward thrust. She stares at her eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing- such- evil, hate, and cruelty.

(The next day)

‘Um, okay, so let me get the traditional treatment- you would like to go through, we could see a lot more, with the ones you want to please and film it all to show the worlds, and we can get this done a lot faster-- she said.

And then there was a flash of light that was knocked out by the feeling of mass blooming around them.

(A week has passed)

‘So-o you just woke up and decided-hurry, what the hell?’
‘...And we must look like the locals- and do as they do, yet they are looking to you to help them- you are the glimmer of hope they need- symbolic.’

The others- ‘Nevach is the hope you need to make unity, she immortal- yet that doesn’t mean that she can get hurt and have all this take its toll on her.’

‘We get you one- a pin with an angle on it along with your name, and in the same breath she said, Emmah and I well were them proudly- just like them that is in famine and feeling the pain of hunger, and loss- by mass death- neutral or not.’

There are flags and banners now with this logo on it showing a moment for change, to end this war, and to take down the evil that has arrows once more...

‘The mass kill needs to stop, by the hands of the rich- or the powerful- that made their way by corruption.’

This is the same world that we wanted to run from, remember the 3 girls, mother, and child and Naddalin too and so forth. Said Haven, walking towards them was a small army of perfect rugged men, in black iridescent uniforms- mussels ripped and rigged- smiles disabling, the hello begin, with a strong stiff handshake Sargent Tristan Billups, Privet Britt Macdonald, the following also Marines to ad one of our comrades, family unites- after all this is a repaid debt of Kristen, greetings- Elwood Dugan, Ahmad Turnbull, Mel Larsen, Rodrick Patino, Bryce Rosser, Clemente Cason, Dino Haight, Deshawn Pape, Clair Delagarza, and Emil Antoine. We are also here to guard you.

Naddalin shrugs, saying ‘Pretty much- the hottest men in the world are here to do as we ask’- with an attitude.

‘You have a lock yourself into to being- a part of us...’ she said, ‘...and the people around here are not like back home, even if we are part of the old ways of life, war, and law.’

‘Because in case you have not noticed,’ Emmah says, practically hyperventilating now- this is a war and most of us will not have a life if they take our world, or each of our minds and souls one by one.

‘Some of us were born to parents so cruel and unusual they are forced to make these kids live this way, I remember being like this- like them too said Karly, to rely on the kindness- of those that say FREAK you to your face, and open your mouth to take a crap in it, the

only friends for the rest of their lives- they must answer too, thanks unwanted, no love, no raising, and lack of education. All to true, and yes, I would take the gift of having one of your immense power men help a week- a meek little girl like me- thanks!’

‘Sorry.’ Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more, she said to Karly.

‘Did I know?’ she said in a fast replay.

‘Guess- I hadn’t thought about that, all that much that was all here over the same facts as the ones that are all around us- that all are all outside of this bunker that was now in.’

‘We need to go out there and fight her.’

‘Yet she has taken over some many minds now- getting in their heads, of kids, just babies, 5 through 12 and using their minds to amass her army agents us- like programmed robots, were outnumbered- by someone’s baby, and I am not killing kids,’ Nevaeh screamed.

Yet the bloodbath has already begun, over 1,000 children have passed this week- splattered down by automatic gunfire- by big muscular men, yet we had to do this even without your say after all-you needed your rest as she was holding her hand in her room next to her hospital bed. buzzers, beepers, and signals going out in the background, you do not have the place to take mine.

This is not what I wanted! She said in a frustrated blowing scream in the face of the head Marine that was her grandchild.

‘Actually, I do.’

6

Though if it makes you feel any better, it was all for a particularly worthy cause- even the children’s death.’ (She gives double thumbs up! And a wide smile with her head turned to one side.)

‘If you say so-o.’

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching her now over this would hurt me more than ever before, this was just the start of her plans- for the good of us all, and me too, walking with me down the long dinginess halls she taking- she is in her dress uniform, she thought- moving faster than her mouth that was going far too fast also for me to grasp...

Then lastly, she said- 'it's been a long time Grandma.'

Looking around everyone got eerily quiet, then one of the men said.

'It is time for you to go now Emmah.'

'But Emmah has never traveled with gold dust before she has to other worlds.' Said one of the girls snakingly with her voice.

'It's okay, just make sure you say where you are going most clearly.'

'How would you get to school? One girl said to Emmah as she pooped into the hallway before their eyes- now in her homeland.'

'Do I have homework?' Emmah asked.

Look, we were seniors and just girls, and all we must do is author a paper with less than 250 words in them a week to have a 2nd-grade education- you know- you did not miss anything this week, as any week, it is just school, where have you been?

'I can't say...'

'Ooooh!' They all said.

'Do not feel bad, Nevaeh was doing 'The Modern Curriculum Press Phonics Kindergarten book in 8th grade.' She whispered.

~*~

I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, took the train as you, and walked and walked... to get here and now it is time to go already, are a week of getting caught up is over.

'She rode the train- why there are much faster ways these days you know.' Said one of them... and unanimously all the other girls agreed.

Haven glances between us, she recently dyed- in her world to the ones that are alive to have a new rebirth, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look Earthlier, to the ones that were once just that Earthing's. 'I kid you not, this is the last time I want to start over. I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes, she was classed as a girl forever- and nothing more than children, doing, thinking, and acting.

We all watched her- like us, climb right off that big steamer train, with all the other first-year students, dorks, retards, and rejects who that were all like us, unlike Naddalin, have no other choice but to ride, remember those days.'

She shakes her head, saying do not say it like that- think it does not say it even if true. That we may never see all of us in one place again. And one by one they were going with their three-man to keep them safe in their new yet old life.

'And I was so shocked by the sight of it- Naddalin with grades around her within the school, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was her after all, were her best friends and all.' Casey Dodson, Crystal Gordon, and Andria Peters.

Casey Dodson has green eyes; she has a heart's happed birthmark under her chin. Crystal Gordon has brown eyes- that you just cannot help but fall in love with, like every boy around, yet she gets angry easily- like- on and off- about anything, and everything. Andria Peters, she has blue eyes, and scars on her wrist from cutting, it is a girl thing- had her heart broken too many times? Yet there are my best friends at the end here in my world; or at least at this point in my life, like everything they come and go.

And then, when I still was not convinced, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Josh who confirmed it- I was done with him, and falling for Crystal Gordon, that has wavy brown hair down to the floor of length.' And that too has made Andria a little made, yet now she has her run at the game of having my old man, I do not want him anyways, boys are so immature!

She holds it up for us to see a pic of her and me kissing.

I glance at Naddalin, also in the photos of the past and think far too much, wondering what she could- be up to- now far- far- away from me in her little world, and that is when I notice she is ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee- in this, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no- name plain pockets- cut off to make short shorts- all fringy, her early look as she calls it, of being all WOMAN.

Even the brown boots she is famous for have been swapped for girlie rubber lime green flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that dash and flash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met-the new low-key look just is not her- I thought. She is not the girl that I used to know- yet neither am I falling for Crystal. And Josh too is now a

remembrance of all things in my past, that my mind is squaring in shaking- trembling- temptations to hit the delete button too all and whip out over 7 years of my life as it was. Knowing the consecutive of my actions, I think not, I meanly I do not what to have to look in a crystal ball to find my past like Naddalin, that is not spilled- with Neveah soul.

‘Or at least not the girl- that I am so-o used to, all the thoughts rushing.’

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- she is also more than a tad colorful and otiose at times, over the fact of her split to Neveah, and she was never the same-old girl she was when I liked her so much.

Yet right now- I cannot think about anything anymore- over the fact that Am’s is standing next to me, and all it smells like her many regrets, couch, and last night’s lunch.

‘Dating is like a game of duck- duck goose, look at the one you want- get called out, run around chasing him or her, and then hopefully win the game- by getting in their spot before you tagged.’

7

Always worried about her clothes- her life and her girl too, her image in general- along with smarts, and the lack of them. Though Andria.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered hidden point of view about her age- to use she is always the same age as the young teen girl.

Nonetheless, even though I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly- an unrelenting push, demanding my notice.

A definite warning that is merely the beginning. That the sudden transformation goes deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda. No, it has something to do with last night. Something about being haunted by her karma. As she is convinced herself that giving up her most prized possessions will somehow balance it all out.

‘Shall we...?’

Naddalin smiles at Crystal, grasping my hand the second the bell rings, all in a day of looking as if I am human- leading me away from Vella Johansen and Hallie Lima who will spend the next three phases of their time texting back and forth, trying to determine what is up with Naddalin. thought Crystal, looking at them with disgust.

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What is going on? What is happening with us- are we falling in love?'

Three girls' hands and hands going down the sidewalk... the eyes never- ever stop looking, do they? She spoke.

'I already told you.' she shrugs her hold body. 'I do not need it; I need you not them so that is all the matters to me anyway. It is an unnecessary sympathy; I no longer care to indulge.'

'...Okay?' She whispered.

'No hesitation very insufficient individuals comprehend the virtuously individual fauna of the marvel that we call love, or how it creates and accompanying soul, distinct from the creature whom the world knows by the same name, a being most of whose essential rudiments are consequent from ourselves.'

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Do not look so serious. It is not a big deal. When I realized it is not something I need, I drove all the thoughts of what they think out and left them hopefully behind for good.'

'Desires are like snaps: in the attendance of the creature, we love- unsexed in all, we take only noes, which we grow later, at home, when we have at our removal once more our inner dark room, the door of which it is strictly forbidden to open while others are existing.'

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, wishing I could climb inside her mind- like I can with my other girls- in time I well I thought- in time, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself- deep, and what is lost in the deep sea she calls her still-beating heart- that is worm-like her body to the touch, get to the bottom of what the is really about- when I am cold and my heart has not made a sound in years- as if dead, and my hands to her always as cold as ice- yet somehow I look alive.

Because not-with-standing the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she is said makes the least bit of sense. Though Crystal, I am in love with her body.

‘Well, that’s fine and all, I mean, if that’s what you need to do, then great, have fun.’ I shrug, fully swayed that it is not at all great, though knowing better than to say it aloud, I thought it was time to go home.

‘But just how are you planning to get around now that you have forsaken your ride?’

I mean, in case you have not noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely- with a girl- and kiss and hold hands and PDA as much as your pleas, you cannot get anywhere without having a drive-its-self-car-cab-pass- either she thought, I should have kept it.’ Yet see the source image ‘The Guardian Taxi’s’ cost... even if- you need one or not.

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter- as I make the call with my thought of mind- for the car to come, which is not exactly the reaction- like- um- I had planned on- yet- um- sure. ‘What is wrong with the bus? It is free.’

‘And gross... and goo-eee!’

I gape, shaking my head, hardly believing my ears- that when she is next to poor- she would not take something free. ‘And since when do you worry about cost, missy- ‘here \$50- go.’

Thanks, you did not have to do that, yet but- forced sex heading into the 5 p.m. and nighttime is a thing on free bus... so, it is best if you have your way home.

‘As some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven slob?’ She said yelling, teasing all mischievously; as I get into my nice worm clean self-driving mostly transparent glass and glowing in soft light- cab; her voice whims off- as the car speeds off down the road.

Crystal- ‘No!’ I cry, shaking my head and squeezing my hand to the other over the top of the other. I hope to convince me, even though I did mean it- not being mean yet truthful- she is now in poverty. Only not in a bad way- like some around here- as she thinks- she is or something even- if- as you know.

At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciate the finer things in life kind of thing, and less in my girlfriend's now she is the version of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl.

'I just-' I squint, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her, but still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess I just don't get it.' I shrug. 'And what's up with the gloves?' I raise her leather-clad hand to where we can see.

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door.

But I just stay put, refusing to budge. Nothing is obvious... Nothing makes sense anymore.

She pauses, hand on the knob, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was an acceptable resolution for now. But you would prefer I not touch you at all?'

Not at all!

That is not what I intended!

8

(Back at school)

I Nevaeh- Switching to telepathy I have a new girl in my head named- Andria too young to die as she did, the moment some classmates approach- I see here there terrified of girls like us, yet she faced death with no fear, reminding her how hard it has been avoiding any skin-on-skin contact for the last three days- with she is just so squeezable- cute.

Fantasizing, I had a cold when we both knew we did not get sick, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed- I was wishing for the day when sickness was not a thing again.

It was torture, pure- and simple. To have a girlfriend so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her- is the worst kind of agony.

'I mean, I know we can't risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don't you think it looks kind of odd, the world we live in, and I fear sickness?' I whisper, the second we are alone again.

‘I don’t care about that.’ She gazes open, sincere, and fixed right on mine. ‘I do not care what other people think. I only care about you.’

She squeezes my fingers and opens the door with her mind, leading me right past Leilani Ogle, a second-year girl, and the other girls as we head for our desks.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday when she woke from Andria’s spell, I am sure her hatred for me has not dampened a bit. It had to be Lily, she would only be that one that could have, and the only one to be back with us. The new girl is tremendously powerful.

But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path to trip me-today she is too distracted by Naddalin’s fresh look to play that tired old game. Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

Nonetheless, just because she ignores me does not mean I can relax or trust that it is over. Because the truth is, it is never over with when it comes to Nevaeh and Naddalin- and the evil they share within.

Nevaeh has made that abundantly clear- that Naddalin will always be a part of her. If anything, she is more charged up and vicious than ever- making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm. As always with those two. ‘Ignore her,’ Naddalin whispers, scooting her desk so close the edges practically overlap the new girls to the point of freaky creepy- eyes bulging even at her.

Nevaeh- Besides even though I nod as though I am- relaxed, the truth is- I cannot- help but feel the way I did about her in the past. I still care for Naddalin, who is part of me- always, in a way, I am in love with myself.

As much as I would love to pretend, she’s invisible-I cannot do it.

She is in front of me now and I am completely obsessed with her. Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what, if anything, happened between us from then and now.

Since even though I know Naddalin’s responsible for all the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, and changing girlfriends a drop of a hat, I had no choice but to watch, to see- why.

‘Spell I tell you spells it has to be...’ she whispered to the new girl.

Even though I know that Naddalin was completely disadvantaged of free will- that does not change the fact- that it happened- that Naddalin’s lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am sure it did not go any further than that, I would still feel a heck of a lot better if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory- I said this also to Andria, who was batting her lower lip with her upper teeth.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I will not stop until her memory gives, and every horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed. Though Naddalin on Nevaeh.

The new girl was just overhearing it all, I wonder if... If she was the one that got them back together. Yet all of us girl’s pounder the same thoughts, about them, in the classroom.

I am about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, ‘Eternally, happiness. Stop torturing yourself- let me in. I have already told you, there is nothing to see- she keeps pushing her transmission in her mind out.’

I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head- that was showing a face of another- within- the face of evil- it was AVA, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille- this thing was rabid at me extremely angry, barely listening as she adds, ‘It did not happen- as she blinked and rubbed her eyes. "It is not what you think," said the new girl, "I can see it too you know- you are just as rational as I.’

‘What is that-?’

‘...It’s just the Demons trying to get out.’ Said Andria.

‘I thought you couldn’t remember?’ I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes- in the front, I knew something bad had happened, as she looks at me and shakes her head like small trembles.

‘Just trust me, seeing this coming out of her is a good thing- ‘I am chatting with it-’ and she is nice said Andria.’ She sighs loudly. ‘Or at least trying to.’

‘Please- don’t you need to report this.’ I inhaled deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

‘Absolutely, and Constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating- now you want more even if possessed, and now you are obsessed with me, all last week, why?’

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, ‘I know that your feelings are extraordinarily hurt. I do. But what has been done is done. I cannot go back; I cannot change it. Naddalin’s done the on purpose- you cannot let her win.’

I swallow hard, knowing she is right.

I am acting ridiculous, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track- by what I saw.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Perry, has arrived. You know it is meaningless to fight this girl’s- she said to us- in class.

The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn’t that enough? Yet her face was black and looking off in the distance.

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations as a seeing all the young servant girl in France- the time we spent- before- you to older, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I was... in my life letting her remember her past that keeps getting whipped away by evil, it was nice to be back... in her mind she needs me and I need her, eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that particular life before- that I was in, I think back, in class and wonder- who was the mind that I was truly in, it was not wrong, it was not evil; it was sweet, young, and innocent. Nothing leading me to think, darkness was involved.

9

But she just smiles, gaze growing warmer as she then shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we never met, that I was sure of, yet she knew Nevaeh well- at a gallery opening in to with their first kiss just outside, I was just out of the galleries, lost in her mind that reviled her face to me in my mind like looking back, for the glass- that very same night- I know who she was.

Presenting only the most drastic moments and sparing my death, which always, certainly, comes before we can progress- deeper and deeper in the mind of what I thought was an old friend and more.

And after watching all those beautiful moments unfold, of a young girl's life, she shamelessly loves her and laid bare to see- for me to recall, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it is enough, to understand that she was the first true love- not me- not me. You have always been enough, I thought, just as she did. It had to be Lily.

Then closing like a photo album in shame when I add: But am I enough for you- now? You were enough then.

To end, acknowledging the truth- my fear that she will soon tire of the gloved handholding, the telepathic embrace.

She then nods, besides seeks out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA, her gloved fingers cupping my chin, her eyes still faded to the memories that were lost, as she wrinkles me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all my fears slip away, letting me that Lily was back and mean no harm. That she too was not on our side.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she at once leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, 'Good, it is time you and I met. Now that that is settled, Naddalin... love me too I am also part of her.'

10

It was a legend that the castle is haunted by The White Lady- the young girl fined of a winemaker, that was posseted by evil.

He killed her on Earth in a small village called Ashville in Pennsylvania, and then took her soul, and killed that too, her name was Ashlynn Donovan, for the young youthful blood.

Why- to keep the Dark Lords powers strong along with the 4 girls, now in one or the Angel Oak wood barrel, that is in the distillery part of the castle in the lowest part of the basement, off-limits to all students, unless they want to receive the most horrific pain that felt in this life...

Winford Vanhorn was a side lover, to the mother- mother, and her name was also the same. Miss. Ashlynn was left body and soul, and partly alive, to marinate- and age just like one of the spirits in the rotation, around her that is red, white, rose, it is also rumored, that all the ones that are part over her army have partaken into drinking the blood of this Ash angel of her sacrifice, pentagram- all hooded, in black.

The dusty ash of her body in the cup- the cries of her memory in the liquid, making strength- to them in every sip, the power to take over the minds of anyone, they wish and linger without asking, to kill, within others, hidden behind a face that is not their own. a faceless army, of kids, taken over by death eaters.

The girl is said to be hidden in one of the secretive rooms, even though the castle has been looked through many of a time, never to be found, and was made to her spirit's requests- and for always and ever added on too- or her hex would- take over all the students minds and drive them to madness.

This is why- there are passages-ways that lead to nowhere, and doors to drop-offs, and staircases that have deadened, it was all done in the thoughts of the ghost, portholes to the other side... The corridor made in memory is now why we have ASH-angels.

As we all know there are seven parts to the castle, classrooms for each study have their type of students.

1. The Ashlynn corridor- for the fallen angels, wings, and flight.

(House colors- Gray and Red.) Two white flying horses, with wings, spread. Paper-smoldering- falling ashes, ink quill with a nib, next to its well. The sun is above. Armed, and showing the strength of a strong girl, body, mind, and soul.

2. Natalie Hall- students have studied telepathy, Telekinesis wizardry, magical studies.

(Blue and White) Naddalin passage's- the understandings of students wanting to know about time travel. Portholes, card reading, astrology- understanding of stars in and out of the magical world. wound law. Insignia is a keystone, railroad spike, the 3 X|X|X for the number of the magical railway- the underworld marking of hell's purgatory, that she saved single-handedly. a crescent moon and a hanging star with a long tail, a key with its hole-glowing, on the other side one barley wheat.

3. Emmah's chambers- crystals ball reading and foreseeing in the darkness, predictions. (Was Anderson chambers, yet- just last year renamed, over dark times.) (Purple, and Cream) insignia shield, with two nude angels one with black wings, holding a crystal ball, and one with white holding a lily, and a dagger between showing loss of sight.

4. Amsel Towers- the ten tallest towers in this world- students for demon's studies- wisdom- understanding- dark faith, witches, hermits all things dark arts- and trickery. (Orange and Cream) insignia flaming tower, fools falling from it in a crest of arms with a black Baird. (Name keep reminding that evil is always the easy option to take.) There is a fear of changing it with us all.

5. McDermmit- sleeping quarters for girls- up in the highest turrets, (Plaid- Aqua and Cream) meaning rest and the importance of deep sleep- understanding, love, hope, compassion, timeworn, insignia hourglass the tree of hope, falling leaves, in yellow, showing change and death, is to come to all. hands held out with a dove, a clock, the hands of time moving backward, all times is just a theory. All things- Death.

6. Barns Library studies- Cherub to Young Lady's to becoming God's understandings, was every story of every girl in the school is magically written and made into books of their life. Also, assignments to other world linger within girls, to recruit. Studies of life, before- death, after, and beyond. Looking out for friends, and not always yourself, making your story change, to make another better- or keep going. (Red and Cream.)

7. Skoufyceol- for Jacqui Skoufyceol, to lock herself out of the death of blaze- and the havens of paradise- to think backward- and question everything for her time- in the 1770s, and not have happiness- to move on, the castle as a hole- named after her for being the first 14-year-old girl to ever become one of us a fallen angel, that had the vision to make a place for loners, misfits, and dreamers. (Green, and Cream) mascots fallen angle- the same as on Nevaeh's head.

11

(Two years have passed)

As I make my way toward history class, I am wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Walsh?

Because while I have not seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my entire world fell apart- there is no doubt, I left them both on a strange note.

My last contact with Walsh consisted of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do- nonetheless also encouraging her to date my aunt and ankle- which is something I am seriously beginning to regret. I have tried to forget them altogether.

And as awful as that was, it is only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin- past days, all playing in my head, over and over, when I aimed my hand at her navel, determined not just to kill her- the child within, yet that was the thoughts, but to destroy her completely.

I am not a murderer, thought Nevaeh, yet it was my job to do to keep this unborn child, as a cherub's angels, the best part of this was how to explain how this all happened, all supernatural.

And I would have too- except for the fact that I choked, and she got away- with having the baby- in this world that would age- and become the next in having parts of both of us within her- now three parts of a whole.

Therefore, she had to stay- trapped young... I was not raising a pug, for with slaughter, with a sputter scatterbrained mind, that going to see things that are beyond her control.

And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I am still so angry with her- of when this happened, who is to say I will not try again?

Then this child, I know, was the rebirth of one of the other girls, all now to get back into both Naddalin and my head and take over control. That is why we named her Alyson.

I will never add baby killer to my list of things they say I am, this child this sweet baby girl, she is immortal anyway, so why kill her, if the part of me, and part of her- I thought, killing at this point is something I do not do any longer. Said Nevaeh.

But the truth is, I know I want to try again. I want so much to be a mother, all over again, and I thought maybe- just maybe, I can raise this one right, and I can keep her from killing me, someday, yet dreaming.

Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the only true justice system- and let it play out and do nothing, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that- but mostly because it is not right, to kill something that was made from love.

Even though Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me no reason to ever trust the child again- I still do not have the right to kill her over it.

‘All the monarch butterfly is now flying back home again. Just like all minds, they remember programming.’

‘They are just like us- you know, you- and me them to, programmed fabricated lives- before and after, in memories of our past, passed to down to the next, of fallen almost satanic retrials, of worship, all over spitting the mind, taking the soul, and lingering within the body, just like the butterfly, it’s all about being part dissociation, all pasted in DNA.’

Oh yes, the cursed typewriter, that makes them all the story of life- in the books of sh-h, that author the stories that you do not want to write, for yourself or anyone else, it is makes you live exactly what the typewriter does automatically, because of the heck that is on it, it makes the story in which a person must follow in the afterlife. Untitled- until monarchs into someone’s life, injected into the mind like clever programming. The butterfly- just like the paper flutter around the typewriter, all too familiar.

Just like we are programming this child one way, and they are fighting just as hard to spit her mind to take it over in another and so that they are getting into ours and reprograming that- too. Said Nevaeh.

The monarch of us... and the satanic of them for sacrifice.

‘Madness!’ Said Naddalin.

‘You know they’re going to kill her when she becomes of the age of 14?’

Yes, I know... yet, let us enjoy this life well we have her.

It will not solve my problem, about seeing an innocent child a young teenager being killed in 12 years sickens me, yet that has always been my hex of living life, I should be used to it, by now- and I have learned to except, the fact.

Love or no love at this point, will not change a thing.

Even though this awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad is the way of life in our world, I still do not have the right to choose the one that is picked for this- and you are sure to know that this was rigged so it would be Alyson...

(Two more years have passed)

‘...Remember to follow the butterflies, there just like me!’
were the first words she said to me.

She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water’s edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside- her mind to hope for the best when she starts schooling. I thought if, in her mind, I could stop her from the darkness that could come.

And that is all it takes.

But I will not... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin, that this child could start school here with us- like the rest, I could get her safely to and from class without resorting to that. If I oversee her, yet odd, to all the others, surely.

Yet I remember my home and school life was the same and I turned okay...

(Flash Back)

‘I was called a p*ssy by them- the girls, my hometown, and even by the parents, yet p*ssy smells a lot better than a*s hole!’
Think about that... right.

(Cut)

Chiaz Naztherth- I ask, why...? I am even here?

I was asked in an interview, that I was forced into, if anything has changed with me over the years, now that 200 years have passed, for my natural life; and I would say- to you and the world that knows me as the lovesick boy from a small town that did not matter- the boyfriend of the girl that made and changed what we think of as a world, the celebrity. I still love her, I still hold on to her panties and keep them on my chest every night, a reminder of her, and the girl I once knew, before mind control.

That is love the unmanned cameras zoom in for a close to his face showing pain, something that little of them feel now in a drugged induced world, of highs, and deep lows.

What is it that you are doing now with her- ‘Now I am lingering as a lost soul in the coal mines, looking for lives to take back with me too, yet I am not the hero- nor- do I want to be, in a way I oversee life in the small town- keeping the memories of the past alive- it’s all I can do- with thoughts of mind have been so narrowed?’

‘Fabricated and medicated, is all these worlds are.’ he said in a whisper.

(Yet none of that matters now, I have found love, with another man, to kill the pain of long nights.)

No woman would want me now, he thought quietly in his mind.

Not even Kasandra, the girl with red hair, would stay with me, for life, not even with a ring. Millia turned too- being she-boy- or identified as such, would have turned on me all because of her. Ashenria also... to most in this world mutated. Lieissah, my only home yet, is now in another world. Yet she was just a little girl the last time, that I saw her... Yet, I feel it may be- time, to move on. Away from all this. He thought in a whisper in his mind- for all to hear in there is all too loudly. I have requested lingering’s in the mind of this girl, yet I was denied, by the God of this world, nonetheless. She has ruined me!

‘So, tell me, ever-so, how was your weekend? It was asked.

Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Katharina Arrington, a new young girl that ends life far too fast just like her hero.

‘Was she now able to survive you-by chance, and send you back home?’

‘No, the girl said, and I do not want to. funny is not it, I have changed now too, and nothing is the same.’

I clench my fists by my sides- and think girl you are throwing so much away, education, a man... and the dream of being more, and going onward, visualization how she would look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, where she left her cold and dying world. I did not have to wonder at all looking back at my life- in a ripping daydream of pain- and now I will take heirs too, despite the vow of nonaggression I took- for all, I will keep.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a whisper as she adds, ‘Not to worry though, you won’t be alone for long, I am sure I will just be a far memory for you to have someday.’

I knew she did not mean anything by that also, yet it was getting under my thick skin- over the fact it was so true.

I will take the place of your soul, in your wake, for your mom and dad, in the lingering over the casket; once the proper

mourning period ends- I will be right back for you, I will be happy to step in and fill up the void of her- your mom's loss. she was the only one to understand.' Said Nevaeh.

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path- as I ghost myself in this girl's dead body lying there... this man was big no wonder she was so afraid of him, fear- is everything to why- with a girl like us, and why we are here.

'Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you must do is say the words you do to her- and no you have grief, her mother said- 'I am right by your side' she said to this dead girl.' and I think yes, yes, yes same old story. then only care about you when you are dead.

Some even grin at me like her- looking into their faces- like a ghost of the past- knowing far more than they well ever, eyes grazing over me most intimately. like some have lost their very last friend.

'But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. to the fact, she is gone forever. Take it if you like- I thought I have nothing planned; your pain is much more important than mine. Because, continuously, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a woman who cannot wait, too long anymore, it is like that part of me is broken. Besides, it is just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.'

'There's only one thing I want from you.' He said, to find happiness, in your new world, wherever that is...'

I narrow my gaze- the eyes within the closed ones until everything surrounding us blurs. Hoping for it all to be over, as soon as possible. I never liked these things when I was alive, yet hundreds of years later, I am still forced into going to them.

'And that's for you to leave me alone.' The feeling I give off to some is to leave me alone, mind like it is on new heartbeat now rising to my cheeks, within her body as I now lock a gaze that deepens to a leer, and some even think they can see my eyes within hers open, in an evil way.

-And-

'Afraid not, darling, she died.'

The mother of this 17-year-old girl- She laughs some to herself as if it is not real, looking me over and shaking her head in disbelief.

‘Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it is like I said, I will wait for as long as it takes. until it gets into your head she is not coming back or home, she is gone forever.

It is Naddalin I am worried about, at this very moment-sometimes, I wonder if I am the right woman for this job. Or if I should just give it all up, to be with her.

‘And you should worry too- not for the dead but the living.’ From what I saw those last hundred years, she is an impatient woman and will become one, I will see to that.

‘A bit hedonist really- I thought. Did not wait for much of anything as far as I could tell, you just might have a long weight.’

12

I- Emmah am now back, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength, and lives to exploit it.

‘Do not get me wrong, she has always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are black and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss had not time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who has been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And she certainly never waited for you.’

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

‘Yep.’

‘Saw it with my own eyes, I did!’

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again.

‘Haven saw it too.

It broke her poor heart, even if it has not been beaten in years, just like ours.

Willing to take her back no matter where she had been, no questions asked.

Along with Emmah who was always like our baby girl. Once more all was right with the world if only for a little while.

Though, unlike me-and, I am afraid, quite unlike you have not loved was unconditional, Emmah too and mine back. Which, let us face it, is something you would never do- right if you are like us.’

‘That’s not true!’ I cried, voiced hoarsely, and very dry, as though it was the first time that I had used it all day- it was so bad.

‘I’ve had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-’ I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

‘Sorry, darlin,’ but you are wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty handholding there-’ She shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

‘Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?’

I- Neveah swallow hard, forcing a calm I do not own when I say, ‘That’s a lot further than you ever got with Haven.’ Now you are taking in the new 17-year-old girl too, this is not love- pervert, it is you laying down for anyone- in many ways.

‘No thanks to you,’ she spits, harsh gaze on mine. ‘But it’s like I said, I’m a man who can wait.’

‘Naddalin is not.’

She shakes her head.

‘Shame you are so-o strongminded to play hard to get, now you are playing with Katharina girl too.

You and I are a lot more alike than you think, despite the fact I want her too. Both of us are pining for someone we will never truly have- it is all the same, you and I are the same girl, like twin Gemini’s.’

‘I could-’ I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know- that where are both falling to her in mad love, that targeting an immortal’s weakest chakra, one of the body’s seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

~*~

(‘Yet this is why- we both of us love the same girl, two minds split that both need the same thing; to make the mind hole again? It was a question both of our minds shared at the same- every time, like clocks meeting hands- hitting a moment of a day, that will not happen again- and time being nothing more than theoretical- unimaginatively-honorificabilitudinitatibus, and wing of a pendulum-like subdermatoglyphic unwinding in the mind, just ever-so-like weighted chains, of the movements within-in sesquipedalianism with the cloth of time itself, lost in a chime and ringing, times slowed- to us both over her, for that moment of realization and cognizance. Now both breathless of inhaling had harsh dust in- pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis, over the fact of utter love, and loss, confabulated by dust itself. wrong but right we longed for just one more kiss, a kiss that would linger, full of lust, hope, and desire, a deficient need, unfulfilled- craving, desire, excitement, fervor, greed screaming hunger, libido, thumping hammering within like the chimes of the clock, and the kiss, making the sounds, longing-sensuality, the kiss gives more thirst, of animalism of yet another time, where the kiss was something newly invented, in the eyes grow black and wide, like the daylight and time, bartered into the minds of the first man and woman. A zoning aphrodisia, absent appetite. A most upheld appetite with avidity, carnality bankrupting the mind time, and hands of the cloth that it is, within the kiss she would give, and the long for more- more just like the time, now where there was no pain- and lost in the dream of your therapy, appetite with avidity and cooked along with deprived, disappointing when ending, failing to emptiness of the gone and missing needing, omitted with the appetite of her face living mine. like the dark shadows, of her lines of the torso’s moving away, like the light of day taking what the darkness stole; the light is coming to take away the darkness yet, the light gives pain, of yet a new day; itching with eroticism for more time in the night to be lost in dreamland, or her mind. Carnality with its avidity, and total- the urge of wantonness, yet comes over and over with body weakness, yet the yen is more than fatigue, the appetite more than lasciviousness, of an end, never-ending. Back in concupiscence lewdness, without the covering, covetousness cupidity eroticism, we both have her in the same night, at the same time, at the same moments lost to time, and the remembrance of it altogether. Lewdness came and come with moments of lechery, licentiousness, sensualism scant and short shyness fading way like the night, moving into sunrise early day,

away, in bereft burned out, into the light like the face of the clock, like the face of the girl we ever-so in love with, cut off defective devoid salaciousness prurience and pruriency. Faulty salacity, with much sensualism and destitute, faulty we all say this that temptation of sin is more than time itself, half-baked and imperfect sin is not a thing any longer, in the minds not all linked together three as one, and thumping like one heartbeat, in default. so much affection, appreciation, devotion with lasting freeness with forgiveness of emotion, fondness for the other girl or woman, more than friendship yet in the end friendship it is like the hand that is time to us, always there, and lasting forever and most continually.

The infatuation lust along with its passion gives us the highest respect and taste, with its tenderness, with its yearning, with its adulation, and allegiance, and its amity. Amour is everything that is, amorousness and ardor, to mind and still hearts attachment by the mind not only; case and cherishing the crush for delight, in the hopes of devotedness, and enchantment is everything that is enjoyment in a cold dry world. the fervor of warmth needed.

Uncountably fidelity cold life afterlife, and time after time. flame needed, like colors, like harmonies, like a religion hankering, idolatry- in doing what has been instilled; inclination piety with much involvement, like partiality piety with a question of why- within. Zeal is lust, like worship, of an idol the ever-so wrong. Relishing rapture about sentiment and weakness worship is love all, not just the norm. Mad for a soft spot and ardency, incomplete, inferior, less- and minus. Questions of not good enough, not up to par, patchy and then pour off all types, sketchy- and scanty scarce. No longer do we feel after the covering of night, and time, with us- now being three in one, substandard, too little too late, or unsound. No longer defective are we feeling in this world, with its time that draws out, erroneous to those that do not matter, even if. False along with feelings of faulty with its hated feelings of them making us feel ever-so flawed, the girl or woman feeling fragile over the fact that she should. illogical over she has no brain or place... inaccurate over a voice that is not as strong; incorrect and insane of saying I feel that you wrong and not I. Unsubstantial and unwell in the head, is wrong to say for the weak and wobbly over insecure and shaky unbalanced, always unhealthy they say and unreliable, and unsafe we are... unstable along with ailing crazed and dangerous, decrepit, and delicate demented, for hope love and change. Invalid lunatic no more, with the love for love, time, and the world even if cold to us. All these thoughts end in losses in the dream of a time in the darkness of them- with love, that is love.')

~*~

Katharina- 'I could kill you right now,' I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I would not do them, even though I know better.

'Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?'

'You could what?' She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath of air movement chills my cheek.

I- myself gape, wondering where she could've possibly-erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, 'Do not forget, love, Naddalin was under my spell.

Which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.'

She got me... right, where it counts. And do not think she does not know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it is too late.

'No worries, love. 'I am having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

Just a moment later- 'I've no plans to go after you- she said.'

Besides, it will not be long 'til you are squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.' She laughs, her eyes on me, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach cannot help but have.

'I will leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to, you will not go after me either.

Mostly because- I do have what you want. The cure for what you suffer from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin.

You are just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You are just going to have to show me how bad you want it.'

I- Katharina gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing,

to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-0 distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it until now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I- Nevaeh press my lips together as my gaze meets heirs... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

So, knowing it is just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

‘Oh, look at that.’ She grins; ‘Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.’

13

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place. ‘Deep breaths,’ her coos, lips...

Then she lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

‘Deep breaths- if you could call them that even if we don’t breathe,’ she coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path.

‘No need to panic,’ I thought. No need to get all spazzed out o’er.

I am sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, with this girl that we both are wearing out, with our clingy love- and find a way to work something out.’

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she is set when in my mind and now the girls too, words slow yet once more, and darkness is coming- days short- and time long, and cautious when I say, ‘Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me not sleep with you- and her alike!’ just as she opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

‘Whoa-oh’ Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room.

She will throw her head back and laugh, allowing her creepy ouroboric- emblem of wholeness or infinity an angel mark just-like a tattoo to flash in and out of view- on her upper part of her head.

‘I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin,’ but if it is a good shag I am after, virgins about the last place I would look!’

Katharina- I storm toward my desk- like the good little girl that I am innocent and sweet, cheeks burning- know that I am that girl that is no longer that girl, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite numerous attempts to quiet them the other girl in my class down. I was the only thing on their mind and not their studies. Not even magic could keep them off me...

-And-

The moment the bell rings, I make a run for the door- just to be barricaded by a bunch of girls- wanting all the gross details.

Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can be convinced Naddalin will push her too far and she will snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, ‘every word... every minute forever...’ I am mocked with laughter trailing behind me as I turn toward them all to see what she wants, by this- it was all going over her head- yet why not me?

I pause, classmates piling up behind me and even pulling at my skirt, I was ever-so-eager to get to the hall, where they can follow Naddalin’s lead, and not mine. Like- taunt me some more than me now, and she seems not to care- like I do.

‘I did it,’ she smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know. What is that I asked nervously.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I had taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

‘I approached her. Just like you told me to.’ She nods.

I squinted some, returning my focus to her, gut-churning it was, as I began to grasp the whole thing. I saw her the next day- it was morning one day had passed.

We even talked for a while, and- she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the events of the others- yet she said to me not to care what others think, care about me and me only.

I stand before her, breathless- feeling, knowing I must stop it- this feeling, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand- and she is in my head too much.

‘She is nice to me, I thought, just like the other one too. I probably- should not tell you but we are having dinner tonight, I said to my girlfriends that understand.’ And you were right, I said to them.’

I- myself nod, shell-shocked and feeling ever-so numb, the words glancing over me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head: glowing and pulsating. eyes rolling back into my head and turning bright white to all that could see them.

She is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stained-glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Nevaeh approaches- causing her to turn and grant her a smile that’s- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there is no shame at all. Those two could not be happier. At least not on Naddalin’s part. Nor Nevaeh for that matter either. No, shame is all mine.

‘This cannot be happening,’ thought Katharina.

For too many reasons to mention dinner can never take place soon enough. One of them being that she is not just my girlfriend, but my guardian angel too, my caretaker, my only everything in this entire world! It is possible- even more urgent reason is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, maudlin, overly sentimental, ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, and another, Nevaeh knows I am psychic while she does not!

I have gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there is no way I am going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted- I want Naddalin more.

But then again- just as I’m about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my lover to dinner and reveal any information I might’ve accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I’d never see her again- when back in the past life that is- and now I have old friends that I have not seen ‘till now, she clears her throat and says, as I look at my past loved ones that have passed before me- before me at that moment, that ended up both high and low, before judgment day...

‘Anyway, you should get to lunch before it is too late. I did not mean to keep you long; I just thought you would like to see them all before we move on- pick now if- and how- and what they are your past family.’

‘...Remember you have the right to see any of them at any time.’

‘Oh, no, it’s okay,’ I say. ‘I just-’ and her voice trails off into nothing but soft murmurs.

I can feel it.

The time is different.

But she does not let me finish. Pulls me out the door as she then waves me away, saying, ‘Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that is all.’

‘No, no- need to go on.’

The last thing my Great-Grandmother said to me is that I had a ‘Desire to Burn,’ that is true, and at some time, I am sure- I will.

My Great-Granddad is here over he had to kill men- way on the way back when- when he was like a pirate- or something like that, to live on man had to kill the other and eat them, when he was lost at sea- when their ship capsized, for days, he was the second from the last, he too was killed by the same gun that was passed around, by being the unlike draw of a straw- in a lifeboat. Queen Andree Loera was the name of the ship, or so I was told.

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin’s gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scan the campus, looking for Nevaeh as she thinks: she is gone, as do I. Gone...? I gape, hoping she means gone as in not around- not lost to the world forever, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

Nonetheless, Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that is all. I drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I’ve never- ever seen before- that she said was an old flame. An old love, or something.

Did she try to tell you?

Did you talk... at all about this beforehand?

-And-

She just left with him.

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good.

Since we cannot afford to go after her no matter what! She must find herself and remember all things from the past!

‘I know whom the man was, I bet you, it was him.’ Said a girl named Jo-Anna far off in the room.

She admitted it, does she not!

This means all we must do now is find a way to- constantly. She frowns... You cannot believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her, to believe. ‘She is not gone...’ You must stay away from her- most of the other girls were saying, she is using you- she cannot be trusted- I just shake my head, throw my head back and giggle like some foolish.

14

(One year has passed)

You are the same, yet not.

And I need you to feel it too.

You and Naddalin have made it simply fine without me.

I could see that then; you did not need me.

So-o, she is not lying- seriously- said- it is the truth, not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, saying- ‘glad your back.’

Her longing eyes darting between us as she says, ‘Okay, that’s it, you have found happiness and peace and yourself- right?’

Haven- ‘You have regained all your memories.’

‘Just what the heck is going on here?’ Said Katharina.

‘Seriously, enough already.’ Said Nevaeh.

I turn, noticing how her friendly light pink aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black wings- that were starting to spread out- in frustration.

Knowing she means no unfriendly will though she is definitely- disturbed by us- as so many personal questions.

Completely, and entirely- It is like you guys have some- like- a creepy way of communicating. It was like Naddalin already knew.

‘That’s because she does.’

Like twin speaks or something- yet all in the head.

‘Like time apart makes you two even closer.’

Only yours is silent. And eerier- said Nevaeh- to their younger muse.

Nevaeh- I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich- pre-made, I’ve no plans to eat it by the looks of it, turn my belly more, yet one bit or two is what I need to survive; figured out to hide just how alarmed her questioning has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin’s, telepathically urging her to step in and handle since I’ve no idea what to say.

‘Don’t pretend it’s not happening.’ Her eyes narrow in suspicion- to everything I have said. ‘I’ve been watching you guys for a while now, and it’s starting to creep me out.’ Said, Katharina.

‘What is creeping you out? ...Us?’

She gazes up from her sandwich, but only for a moment before she is back again looking as if it could creep off her tray.

‘Look it’s snowing hard outside; she said now looking out that arched window that was steamed with heavy fog.’

‘Those two, have always been like this.’ Said Emmah who had just sat down beside them, ignoring all their personal space.

She points to a black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip- from her cupcake. ‘I swear, they get stranger every day- in finding their memories of all things past.’

Naddalin nods, setting down in-between, them all as she takes a moment to look us over.

‘Yeah, I have been meaning to mention that. You guys are so weird.’ She laughs.

‘Oh, and the whole glove thing- really?’ She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishers and red. ‘So not working for you,’ I said jokingly.’

Haven frowns at us, annoyed by my joke when she is trying to be grave.

‘Laugh all you want- at them, we understand we need them,’ she says, gaze steady, unwavering, abiding, determined, and enduring.

‘But something is up with those two, I just know it. I may not know what or why, but I will figure it out-in-out-in time. I will find the underlying cause of it- I assure you. You will see- you will see- I will.’

-And-

I am about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her blue drink- that was making a foggy mist of it, leaning toward Haven as she says, ‘Do not waste your time. It is not as dire or evil, malevolent, mischievous, ominous, perverse, threatening, and adverse as you think.’

She then smiles, glaring with a gunning look and ogling with somewhat of a peek than a gaze that was fixed on me.

‘We’re exercise, hone, prepare to rehearse, and practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that’s all.’

‘Attempting to read each other’s minds in place of talking all the time.’

‘So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other’s bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.’

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside- like a pus-e pimple.

Gaping at my significant other who has just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do!

This is something we worked hard to do, looking within the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, 'Please. I am not an idiot; I know what you to are up to and doing.'

'Wasn't implying you were.' Naddalin smiles. 'It is quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?'

'Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.' She nods- as she does, she starts seeing daydreams as if they were realities play out, sincere gaze meeting her- within the lifelike dream.

'Focus on that number, she goes into a trance- eyes rolling and body limp- the magic takes place, so dark, she was now taking the part of the drain she needs, to think about a number and replacing it, replace it with her thoughts- or other things, mind control, now think with all your might- and it is all blocked out by my replacements. See it in your mind as clearly as you can- and it is like you are there, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?'

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road-only the particular- disaster is me, in a car crash as if I were some other girl- who I felt I have met yet was not sure of...

'Now close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten, and then the memories I had are now yours after you have counted down to receive them.'

'It's could the butterfly effect.'

'Transferring life to life- to after-life to after-life.'

Just like I can take all your bad thoughts away, and give you mine, or take away your education, I can even make you forget your name, it is all dark magic.

'Wow,' is what Haven said.

She nods some to the thought of feeling fear over someone have control of her mind and body- and having as an outer body expresses of feeling as if a soul has been overlaid with her own, sincere gaze meeting her- and their eyes lock, and they both see the same

things- childhood dreams, schooling past, moments of feeling like posttraumatic stress.

‘Focus on numbers only- let your eyes show me where that is in your mind, and I bet you there gone, with all of you might. I can ask you over and over some like $2+2$ and it is not going to be there is it, I now own you, and all that is math in your mind. The ‘4’ you are looking for- I can give to you only if- I give or allow- yet think as you may it is not there.

‘It’s frustrating’ she said.

This is what you know who did to make me look as if I had disabilities. Said Nevaeh.

See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?’

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration.

‘Nope, nothing- nothing- nothing.’

(Many moments passed.)

‘Unbelievable.’ she whispered.

Though choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said. You find yourself lost in trances of other things in the remembrances of all things past.

Time, most of all, dreams, and memories. It is like the mind goes into overload and finds a place to unlock, that are your escapes. consciousness is lost to time; time is the theory of the essence.

The mind is the recollection of the remembrance of all thought the anamnesis, awareness of a moment within moments within seconds even down to the nanoseconds, you feel all and is all too real.

Ever-so dreamy, yet cognizance, with a flashback, memorization mindfulness recalling recapturing recognition within time and space, of a life’s reflection of something that may not even be realities just a place at a time, with a moment, that counterfeit, ersatz is the reminiscence, just retention is life, retentiveness is the discipline to go even deeper in the thoughts replace by the scrutinizer.

The remembrances of a past, becomes- subconsciousness becoming in the heavy programming, retrospection of

subconsciousness lost in the camera-eye looking back at you, dead-eye on one side- is the look of someone undergoing, you can see them take over- within the eyes, all mind's eye, to replace a moment in time, to make new remembrances of what was and is, turn out to be part of what will become past.

All it takes is a speedy glimpse at her aura, altering into a dark deceitful blue-green, and a brief peek at her thoughts to see she is only pretending. Some days, things just take way too much of my energy, it is like you look up and the whole room's spinning... You do this and it takes all your cares away, just to over complicate, people will tell you to medicate. You will swear the sky's falling.

Haven- 'How do I know if this shit's fabricated?'

'You don't!' Nevaeh.

It took me years to know- and I was called crazy- like who is going to believe you, when you say- you have voices in your head.

15

Knowing she is baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor. Math was always her thing... she was left dumbfounded over the fact she could not even think.

Then she rips out and all the numbers rush into though head- that was exceptionally long and very brilliant and that gives a headache- just to think about. She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue- and her I.Q was higher than 160- this is where you have now split the brain into chambers of parts, unlocking thoughts of extraordinary. This is what you do in the healing processes of this, zoning out- into another focusing, that is not fabricated.

'Then we must have our wires crossed in thought.'

She shrugs. 'I'm not getting a number at all.'

That is because you have everything that was in this girl's mind now mixed with your thoughts.

'Try me!' Emmah abandons her notebook on this dark topic, and her books and wand say a spell, makes it into a pen, and leans toward Naddalin. Now she takes what was the want that now has a large feather- on top of pen nib and dips into the ink and takes frantic notes.

Eyes barely closed- with how these notes would be said tongue to the side of her lips, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps- her hand to stop, 'You're going to Haven- say things here that should be sh-h, hushed, saying things that can get into the wrong hands- is not good magic.' This has already been said, in the book of life, you do not need to draft notes- unless the notes are in ink that only you or we could see, the notes on this have been changed over the fact they need to be, now in code. She shakes her head also, saying 'yes, it is for the best.'

(A week back)

'Everyone but me- has gone through this,' Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

'Mind control is wrong, this is a scar, she said, along with- 'like think what you could do with this, you could have mass death and one dictator.'

'We do I am sitting in front of you. I run the show with the world.'

'Well, I am sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.' she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying 'sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,' and she holds up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why she is so upset over the trip.

I remember- I mean, yes, so she used to live there France- before the wars, before the transitions, before it was made into districts and parted into jurisdictions.

Long before it was covered with the blood of death by the people in revaluation. Sometime before the flag with the star was marking the undesirable what they became, that were slew, at one time when I was truly alive- after my boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident, or so they called it... the troopers or something like that- I was equivocal about did not want to say... all that much, I was only in my early 20's.

She said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I got what it meant.

Yet, it said, 'I will live on forever...' or something like that, or 'I don't need you!' - 'or even suck on that!' Like- I thought that is what it may have said- but- but nah- it can't be- yet maybe?

...It is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reads the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind! Just like most of Earth itself, now brown rust in color, and derelict.

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face. Seeing what has become of her past world. It looks just like Mares- yet with all the buildings dilapidated and covered with Ivy vines and vegetation yet with low gravity and air- the sky orange and yellow, did to me when I was alive, so long ago.

~*~

'Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,' Haven says, swiping her finger across the top of her cupcake until it is coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

'But I am afraid you are going to have to try a little harder than that. -All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I will find the underlying cause of it. I will not expose your dirty little secret.'

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she is just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she is serious.

'When are you leaving?' Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

'Soon, but not soon enough,' she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared at her. 'Let the countdown begin!'

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, 'You will love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.'

'You've been...?'

...?...

I and Haven both asked at the same time.

Naddalin nods- 'I's have,' gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. 'I lived there once a long time ago.'

'That's what we gathered...' they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, 'Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.'

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

'Well, don't you think that is a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?' Sher leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it is hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin's solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

'Is there anything I should see while I'm there?' Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. 'Anything that shouldn't be missed?'

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

~*~

'All of France was worth seeing... yes, was it not?'

I definitely- remember- check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- where every inch of Frances was covered in their blood. There are even homes and shops built into the bridge.

'I think Italy Venice, was worth seeing more,' said Nevaeh.

Oh, and you show me the memories of visiting the Galleria dell' Accademia which houses Michelangelo's David among other important works- lost to history and war-and the death of a planet, and show me why the-' David- was so inaugural important,' Emmah says wanting this so badly to have and keep all memories of these wonderful places, from earth to see and hold in her mind forever- to be the to keep all the remembrances of all things past, when it comes to art and history.

'We... yes, I am giving you everything- girl- surprise!' Emmah was delighted in her expression.

'We did not want to tell you, that you are the keep of seeing beauty.'

'As well as the bridge, and the famous Il Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it is supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts, paintings, and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that?'

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

'Nothing offhand,' she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

'Though any place that claims to house great art but is not in the guidebook is a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries, thanks to all the war, and moving to new worlds away.'

'You shouldn't waste your time on that when there are so many other- like the western towns, are far more interesting things to see, all we need to do is travel- a star- a world away, and its already there- and recreated.'

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to writing notes again.

'Whatever,' she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly on the side of her head.

‘No worries, Naddalin said she’d make me a list.’

(Back home)

‘I’m amazed by the progress you’ve made- with Dariez, she is doing so well.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘You learned all on your own? It is all around reading people.’

She nodded, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with me for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

‘Thanks, for stopping by.’ she said, leading us into the home.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin’s reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady’s- all cute and such.

Aiming at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I am not even sure where it went. All I know is it is no longer there I want to be-and she points to the old home she was half-grown in that is now dilapidated- and you were right all along.

‘Looks like you are no longer in need of my lessons- you are not a little girl anymore, then, and your surly a woman now. She shakes her head, saying you are wringing I need you more now than ever.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we will get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least produce a less hokey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you will do fine.

‘I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can’t possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.’

Reaching for her hand a second too late and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

‘The furniture’-her gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-’ is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

‘I don’t like change-’ she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and sees her new life coming.

And as for the rest-’ Her shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. ‘Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I do not need it now.’

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past...

Then Nevaeh, the pictures of her in plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

‘Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You must get them back, don’t you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can’t you?’

‘It’s all energy- all memories of all things in the past- to make the future!’ She squeals.

~*~

‘Ever so, relaxed in my thoughts of time travel. It is just stuff.’ Her voice firm, resigned, as she turns toward me again, saying old STUFF. ‘None of it has any real meaning to me anymore, yet I want to remember it all. The only thing that means anything is you- and this stuff is what makes up the entirety of you.’

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. ‘But that is where you are wrong. It is not just stuff- too.’

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from one side.

And while I am perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank. I was at a loss for words.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen to the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

‘It’s history for God’s sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if he is still alive, back in 2018!’

‘So, like he would be over 90 now or more, you cannot just shrug it off as though it is nothing more than a box of old tired books and lots of words that no one cares about, even if, it the story of all of our lives.’

All- of this stuff is nothing but tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, like the books- I have penned too. Nothing more than a waste of time and paper, along run-on of contextual spelling ears, Grammar issues, punctuation wrongs, sentence structure issues, and styling problems.

I thought they were worth remembering- like the one about a world lost without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that fought for her place, as an equal- the youngest in her class.’

Look at this thing, the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. ‘I thought you hated my ‘dusty old room’ as you once called it.’

‘People change- worlds change, times change this is no longer relevant, and so I feel.’ I shrug, thank about that asking why?’

Wishing, not for the first time, that she would change back to the woman I knew before she was split within her mind also.

‘And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my trip to France, and the memories of my past, that I want to share with you?’

Noting the way, she hardens at the mere mention of the word.

‘Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to, keep the books is said to me... when the memories are the photos, and the book’s text the plot and the making of the movements- the flow of time push-pulling fading in and out-the part and place of where to go in the time travel, moving fast, and moving slow, and with both the movie

you see, I do not understand why she does not see it that way. The connection you do not want her to know about?’

Yet were there the good times- I do not know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, ‘I’m hardly what you’d call freaked.’

‘You know what...?’

‘You’re right.’

For a normal person, that was hardly what you would call a freaked.

But for the girl who is always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you are upset.’

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. ‘You saw what happened in France.’ She then squints. ‘Despite all its virtues, it’s also a place of unbearable memories, ones I’d rather not explore.’

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, ‘like a penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion?’

Until my death until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.’

Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching her parents being murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs’ intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and she encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I cannot help but feel like the world’s worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

‘I prefer to focus on the present.’ She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. ‘And right now, I need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.’

And though I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny, I suppose we should try-’ I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

I remember you saying- ‘I’m selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.’ She shrugs. ‘I thought you would understand?’

‘But- you can your one of us now... you can now see all this too, okay she said to her, and just like that they were ripped back into the moments where they were sitting eating in the hall, of the school.’

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter- that it must here and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- you like all things that is really- like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

‘Do not look so upset. Nothing has changed. It is just a house, I never wanted her to get rid of this home after I was nice enough to make it happen to her.

A seriously under an oversized house, though it was, I need to move on from. Naddalin was mumbling crazily and softly talking to herself. Saying the same things over and over repeats.

And just like that she was gone and said OKAY if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes- within the air. Moreover, that was the last time I saw her- ‘till now.

Nonetheless, I just stood there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it was the first time we had met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know, me and Stan are going to have a baby. there are never going to be enough rooms or rooms for three.’

‘And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?’

‘I just thought I’d move in with him, that’s all.’ Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for her, ‘Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. ‘Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don’t want it’

I did not say- yet I thought you are stuck with regardless, you are hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what had gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they would end up without her- yet she said to me- he is looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

‘I mean, Naddalin, if you are seriously looking for a fight, I do not want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?’

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heart of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I am getting used to my powers, I do not see the point.

‘What’s this really about- I thought?’ I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.’

‘I mean, you’re the one who got me here.’ Oh, I was- mortified.

You are the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I am finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

‘Seriously! Why are you doing it?’

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back at me with the sun shining brightly, then

turning toward me when she says, 'I have already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other extravagances- I have indulged myself in for the last hundred years, so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. -I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.'

You and I Make Always

Start:

Chapter 1

The Year was, and I remember back to- 2019, forgive me... Whereat the Cambria, fair, and I are holding cotton candy?

Remember-

~*~

Night-

Come on, honey, let us get you ready for bed, I was 13 at the time.

I am no special girl here, just a collective girl here doing a thing as I should, think of boys and rubbing myself on then in my thoughts at night, I read, I think, I even poop too, throw girl are not allowed to say that right, not in these times.

All way with sweet and common girlie thoughts.

-She has a teddy bear and is looking for young love, and hot passionate nights.

I have led a common little life. There is no testimonials dedication to me or for me, yet I may be dying of something bad, I can say. Plus, my name Andria will soon be unable to be remembered by all that was of the past days. But in a single difference, I- myself thrived as magnificently as anyone who ever lived a young dumb yet cute life. Looking good, girl. As I walk the halls of this big creepy place. 'I feel okay today.' Yours truly here feels that she loved another boy with all my heart, and soul, body, and mind. My soul and for me, that has always been enough to give to him if that would have wished.

Chapter: 2

How is it feeling and doing, honey- bunny? Going to kick it- I keep trying to die, but they will not let me say I am so stinking cute. Well, you cannot have everything even if it is fading or living without pain on both. Immense day today I have planned. You say that every day, with a cute-wost-ie smile on your little blond-haired blue-eyed face, you little angel. It is a lovely day outside. Let us take a walk, outside of today, we do not think so, you are not able to at- all- yet. (Wishful thinking) Well, we must get you out of this room. Come on now, honey goes to the playroom and does coloring and things like that. Some fresh air is what I want! Grrrr!

Chapter: 3

It is all good I do what I always do no complaints, good morning. I am so sad and sorry at this point of my beginnings starts of my young little life, it is not a good day, to be me; I want to play and dance and sing and do girl little cute-z things like painting my toenail to match my toes-ie ones. I have a long sunn-ie dress and not as much hair as I did, but it is fix-able if I work for it. OUTSIDE? I asked. She said- baby- girl- I do not think it can happen."

The nurse says- she is up for anything.

Chapter: 4

Hello? (Boy) I like him, he is funny and handsome. This is me! Doors fly open as she runs and stops running and stops looking in at the dying kids in their rooms and beds, the older boy David- he comes to read to you. Read a kiddie story of hope and love and goo-goo-ness, with unicorns and ponies? –Yeah- not that pain starts within me, and I feel as if I had to run to the bathroom to not keep it down the treatments are talking to me, I do not know if this is a goodie thing-ie.

Oh, come on, back to bed, and sleep this off, it goes in OUCH-ies, and her sweet little- light goes out.

Ahh... snoring, yet one old bitty' said- All right now, that keep her away for three hours.

(Noon)

Where did we leave off? In the story... Oh, yes, yes, here it is- baby. It was the night of the carnival, a news story this time, I knew yet I did not remember it, I lost something I could feel yet they do not tell me anything, so I figured out what I could, yet that not much being my age. 'David was there with his friends and Maraca.' -David? - That is where those both met- them... It was around the time and date of September- 19th of 2014, Andria was nine years old or so.

(Girl) She has the same name as me. See you then there at the park- groundwater squirting game: little girl wins a prize. He tried to get her something yet epic failed! Foodie! I watched that off so hard, no ding-a-ling-ing here. -Thank you for playing- a boy. -Hah, you are funny I am a man here not a boy. Man, I clobbered, it is all good she bears hugged him for being just him and that was sometimes being, cute yet very dumb for the acting of dumbness. I bet that thing, Yuck- ie- funny it did not come off, oh that that thing.

I am telling you I did baby; these games are rigged.

Chapter: 5

The nighttime before bedtime, hello, it was him I remember some of the stories now, that he said earlier... -How are you, good- feeling good? Howdy, what is your name, U- NO it baby thinks- hard ...?... I do not think I do- and story time starts for her, as she thinks on. Footstep comes right up here now. Over the knob, certainly. Whoa. Yeah-a, singing it out in a hum,

- Who is this girl with Maraca?

- Her name's Andria Samilton.

She is here for the summer with her family.

Dad's is the poorest around, yet she cute right good butt for you.

Ha- funny then why haven't you been with her yet?

Walked apart to see this girl.

- Hello Paulie!

- Hi, honey.

Look, I won you a prize, he rips one down from the mouse game as she walks towards him.

That woman was P-O-ed, at the game, yet they walk off one arm wrapped around.

Paulie- oh, thank you! She giggled without thinking at the thought of him and she ran around like a mouse on the wheel of the game. Ow-ha! A bear- cute- Love! He said -yeah, -sure- kiss me! They did... Hey great, huh I look at David like I hooked her?

Chapter: 6

Hey, Andria, you want some cotton candy baby-girl? - Umm, okay honey. That would be so much fun if you want someone. Sure, look down there... GOD keep it in there I do not want to see it, she said. You only get one chance, teenager. You want to dance with me or ride with me, or on me, or something like that?

I am David Talhhoun.

SO-o?

- So, it is nice to meet you.
- Andria, who is this guy?
- I do not know, David Talhhoun.
- I would like to take you out.
- Friend! Do you mind?

You cannot sit more than two people in a chair, David.

Go out?

- No.
- Why not?
- Because- I do not want to.

David, she is with us, so do not chase her away with your dumbness, and crap.

Hey, Andria, you want to ride the merry-go-round?

Up down, up-down, up Down- they went like their love life would go.

- I would love to sugggggerrrr.

They are kissing- and feeling each other out in the tunnel-of-love.

- All right, the boy said in the 1st seat.

Love is all we need right- the book closes for the night as she falls asleep on him.

(Boy) walks out of the room kissing her forehead and says I will never forget you as you did with me yet love and luck do not always go hand and hand.

Chapter: 7

Reason with me. Plea me. - David Talhhoun.

- What?

Works down at McDonalds with Paulie age seventeen.

Oh... Did you see he was standing like that god do you think it is- like- oh?

Run up- he dad- like not even one inch away from her face? GOD- what do you want to from me, she said not happy, yes, I saw, said the girlfriend, that's David, though. Always doing the crazies, are you at all surprised, not at all I like it, yet I do not, we will see I do not know yet, I girl what can I say. He even came over to you, like he was going to kiss you and not even know your name first. Sweet but creepy!

He likes you, she said with delight. Yes, my dad would too. I think- Nah- for now anyway. Hey what... jerk... as he pulled my hair, saying I was cute. Get off me, I said as he was all wrapped around me going for it all. God older boy- Do not touch me. -Hey!

I love you, girl, without a name! - Well, I... ugh! HUM, I thought about him and what I saw there. What are you doing tonight?

Hey, you cannot do that as she runs off the merry-go-round! As she was there, he almost falls on his tushie, I will pay you when I get off, Dan.

-He asked you out-

Yes, he did- I like him- eyes rolled dreamily, both hands flew upon her red cheeks. Okay, Dan, I will get- it- oh- off, all right. Get off, David, you need to come.... (Girls-What?) Award stop in his yelling words- 'OFF' as it spins 'round, you need to come- what...? Off.

He tripped you are going to kill yourself for her boy!
David, cut it out, boy. Now, will you go out with me as he hopped on my hose-ie? What the freak?

- No?

Hey boy, she just told you.

It keeps going around. Rings being tossed in the mouth of the clown.

Lean into it so you do not fall getting off, it goes, fast.

Why not?

I do not know you at all, and because

I do not want to. You do not need to know me to 1st date girl. How else do you get to know someone if you do not try first-dates, go by what your friends say?

David!

Come again? Would you- GO!

NO! He spoke.

Girl- Well, you leave me no other choice then. Oh, my God gets it in your head and not that one I do not want it. I am not kidding; I am falling for you. David, stop misleading people around.

- What are you doing?

- I am going to ask you one more time, he kisses her on the cheek, from behind. Will you... NOW as he gets up on her and the house, doing things I can say, yet think like a boy. Will you go out with me?

David, you had better come on and stop it. Girlfriend next one over... my leg is slipping.

- Then get down and off, you idiot. That way I am doing if she says- yes. Not until she decides. 'Aw, go on out with him, baby said some old man in next row.' All right, all right, here and goes down his undies, and then see feel it and push him off, I will go out with you. She knew it was all love, she was feeling it too. It was up to my butt so- yeah- feel in the blanks here.

Chapter: 8

What?

Who?

When?

Why?

They?

It?

Some?

Doing it?

No, do not do me any favors if you say yes, he spun out on the floor of the ride.

No, no. Do I want to, yes?

Do you want to?

Did she say Sucking- yes!

Do you want to?

Yes!

Say it again.

I want to go out with you- now.

Say it again.

I want to go out with you.

All right, all right God keep it in your pants!

We will go out.

You think you are so clever, don't you?

David, you idiot! She spoke.

She remembers my name- yes!

Girlfriend- That was not funny, nope, it is okay hun, I will take care of this boy soon.

Girl asked- on her deathbed- I remember the girl from the Carnival, right... she was my friend, right?

Do you remember me? I asked with wondering thoughts- of hope.

Yes, sure, the boy that reads to me, not the boy- what was he called- Mr. Bonner, was it? He looked pickled. How could I overlook the speculations of me wondering thought-age? I wanted to clear that up with you because I am categorically regretful about that all.

It remained an imprudent thing to do... on that ride, to talk to somebody. But then again, I had God was saying she was my baby angel sent from the heavens.

I had to see if I could get her naked before the night was over. To be next to you. I was being so pulled into you. Um... oh, what a saying here, it is nice, so nice! Do you use that on all the babes?

- No, not all just you hun.

- Right, you are dumb.

I saw you all rubbed up against your little girlie friend, what is her name, with brown hair and green eyes.

- What are you doing tonight?

- Could you repeat that? Go out tomorrow night?

What do you say, baby? What about this weekend, stay at a hotel or whatever?

I know what you want, I do not give that to boys.

- Why?

Our date then?

Maybe- she walked away- skipping, and humming show tunes.

I did not even say I would go on that date with you.

The date that you agreed to go on with me.

No...!

Yes, you promised.

You pledged and you swore it did you not.

Sound good, I speculate the thoughts of yes or no: Yes, for you would have killed me with it behind me if not. I changed my mind over time to yes or no, I must see, maybe?

Look, I know you get some dirty boys coming up to you on the street doing crazy things... I do not know him. Why do I act as if I do? You do not know me by now do not you, I know me and that is good enough, right?

Chapter: 9

Plus, when I see something that I like, I love to see the small-town charms- ha... I love it. I go... I mean, I go crazy for it. Okay, what are you speaking of? Well, you, see into me, you do.

Oh, you are good at this and you? What the Hel-? You are too moral. Certainly not. No, you are getting me wrong. You have it all now, yet not me. But you-

You are something ant you.

You are your ant putting badly. You are whimsical, fanciful, unusual, imaginative, original, creative, and quirky, and I would even give you impulsive and capricious.

Hugh?

I am not.

You are so stupid, I like that...?

Chapter: 10

You are so go-o, I am mesmerized. I am not frequently like this, I am sorry. You make me dumb feeling and acting.

Uhm, oh my- like- yes, you are. I can be amusing if you want... thoughtful, uh, smart, um, illogical, and courageous. And uh... I can be light on my feet. I could be your all and wonder, and magical, whatever you want. You just tell me what you want me to be, and I do that- love. I will be that for you forever and ever never let go of you to the day you or me, am not around to say- I love you.

You are CUTEY dumb and love me I see that. OKAY!
You win, not smart- I could be that for you too.

Come on, let us go for this date, you want as bad as me. What is it going to hurt if we do things after and now? Umm... ah- uh- I do not think as a result so maybe it is okay if I am like you. Fine, what can I do to change your mind?

Andria, you remember David, don't you? The movie adds start whit supposition- you will total and get something out. You unquestionable she is coming for it hard? Lessen, chum, it is all set up. We are meeting her for the late show tonight so back off her. Look... what did... I tell you what? Come on now and see this movie picture.

Oh, my goodness, it is bad, his hand on mine... I feel more to come. What a happenstance she felt! Kissing him with popcorn, and the taste of butter, and Pepsi, I need to talk to you for a second. He is here...! He was sitting on my hand, and the other way around, yes, I remember- Yah.

- Come here.
- Paulie!
- Hi.
- You look great.
- Hullo.
- It is nice to see you yet again.
- You are too.
- Aw, thanks.

You look great and feel good next to me. She is kissing my ear, saying sweet nothing.

You do look great. You look great. "And I know I look great," said Paulie, "so could we please see this movie now and hush up?"

The show's about to start. After you, he asked for a kiss on the lips. You come back here, baby. You are not going to catch me; she runs for the water's edge and prattles boats. Swans all around them as they kiss in the sunshine, next to the old steam train puffing down next to the oak trees and picnic tables.

See her as she runs, wild and carefree, in stupid love, with such a poor boy.

Chapter: 11

I am supposed to catch you! Kiss, kiss, kiss, lip bite, eyes tight, and lashes long on his cheeks. I am faster than you.

No, you are not... You are not- you are not- you cannot!

Nope, no...!

I am wet for you now, just drenched with the water on the edge. I will get you, baby girl! I am going to get... Here I come! Let me love you.

You had better run fast! And then met slowly in a hug, run and it is falling in love again, being apart for that long. Park and outlying past them all, that looked past all the rides too.

Love after, after falling madly in love, love, love, a- love. The big wheel in the sky is lighting fireworks off above and inward.

Wait for me, baby girl- I see you there, never about where they, never- ever apart- I would even sleep with me in the night for I said, I was scared, and ran into his bed, held tightly.

Chapter: 12

(Back on the first date)

Want to walk with me to my house? He did old ways I said- mom well loves you for this. Her- what happened? ...In that movie? We did not even see it I could not even tell you for sure.

Here you go. Thank you for this night we did not even kiss at the door mom was looking so yes. What are you guys doing now and then? We giggled and did say anything but the truth.

Even if I was open to him now. Yes, what is going on with you too? Yes, is that all...?

...Just and movie no more no less- um she now by the look on my face, and the glow you- un-floweriness. Mom passed a week later than I had. Do you guys feel it for each other? Yes- yes- we do.

Do you-ah Love each other? Yes- I love him! I love her too. Oh, I get it. Do you guys love each other, THEN HUN?

Do not do anything you are going to regret I would not do. Unacceptable, goodbye.

All right, all right. Mm... That was fun, we are going to do it again. Mm-hmm. I have not seen a movie in ages. Really?

Huh-uh. Not meanwhile I was a little kid. Pardon? Nope, I, uh...ah? I am busy, you know, I do not have that much time do not yah-see. Are you busy? -hmm- Mm- I have a very stern agenda.

My days are all planned out even back then, I had to deal with this crap. I get up in the morning... banquet, school day, get it in- here- work on homework here, play some all alone, reading time, bath time and sleep time and do it all over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over. Math, English tutor, lunch at some point if I can hold it down, music lessons- piano lesson, and that about all they will like me do, TV. It is nice when it works also.

And after dinner and blowing it all over- I spend time with my family, for three hours before they go home, and I stay here all alone in this glowing white and could room, next to my bedmate Sam. She does or says a lot. She has a week to live, and she is five years old. And then I... I catch up on some reading, she is sawing logs! Wow stop breathing- um I think about that one hard and then say- Nah- do not do that.

Oh, Mom and Daddy see you soon pull through one more day baby.

We decided to pull the plug- so she would not suffer- age ten.

We all gathered around to see her. Everything is over... they look down on the life she never had- yet she has a sketchbook of her short life here. No, not everything is readable- however, it is all there in her handwriting. But the important thing is she remembered for her. And then everything else, she was not. And that way youth and

innocents with young love mixed in. free- and wild to see life fade fast.
You get to decide all by yourself to live on or let go?

She did not we did- the hardest thing a dad must do is she,
someone, you love to go- before you. It had to be I would say- it had to
be this way. I do not get it either.

Why?

God- or whomever why make the plan of killing sweet
little kids? Why do you want to do this to me- why? Mom- she never
stopped crying; it has been four years now.

Chapter: 13

I will always think of you that way, I will think of you in
the morning sun and when the night is new...

I will be looking at the moon and think of you...

But the first time I ever saw your face-

The first time I ever saw your face-

I will be seeing you.

Morning, Mr. Talhhoun.

Mr. Talhhoun?

Call Dr. Mandite Von and USC, okay? I have no; I got no
pulse anymore- she said. I have nothing to say, just how I love you and
you feel that even now with things gone like even if your heart is new,
it feels the same to me and you. Let them know we are in full arrest.
Call me- on my cell if you can, if you can this evening, I see you
tomorrow if I can and you can. All right, we will do this if we can.

We talked about this. It is all right now sleep, and rest now
think about your life and how it was. Come on, come on, sweetie.
Okay, yes, come on, let us go. Time to go- It is okay, baby, come on.
You know it is.

Just try not to get her over happy she needs rest not a
boyfriend right now, said, mom.

Oh, Mr. Talhhoun you came to see her.

Welcome back, the baby girl sees that you went through
all that well. How do you feel? Finally, Apt as a swindle. Where are

you going, the girl at the stand asked? I was just taking a walk, thinking about how- I cannot sleep without her. Fine, you know you are not supposed to, it is against the rules. Yes,

I know. You were not going for a walk, were you? You were going to see Miss Andria again was not you. I just got out of the hospital, and I miss her you see.

Mr. Talhhoun, I am sorry you can be coming in out of her room like that at night, but I cannot let you see her tonight. Here and now, you are going to have to go back to your room. As for me, I am going to go downstairs and get myself a cup of coffee. I will not be back to check on you for a while, so do not do anything foolish- I want to go to do that- I just want to see him if I can-

Hi.

David.

David.

Hi Baby girl. I am sorry I have not been able to be here to read to you.

I did not know what to do. I was frightened you were not ever coming back to me my love. I will continuously come back. What is going to happen when I cannot remember anything to any further extent? What will you do? I will be here always and ever. I will never- ever leave you. I need to ask you something. What is it, Baby girl?

Do you think that our love can marvel? Sure, I do the same. That is what conveys you back to me each time.

Do you think our love could take us away together even if I go away from you? I think our love can do something we want it to.

I love you.

I love you, Andria.

Good night.

Good night.

I will be seeing you there soon.

Chapter: 14

I want to show you something, the boy said I had this; it was hers.

- David, what are you doing? As the pages started to show and he read out- to them as he did with her- day in and day out. -What now? She loves to paint. Yes? -Mm-hmm. Huh. Most of the time, I have all these drawings shown in here and look over then seeing her do them going back to the time she did them. Thoughts bouncing around in my head. Are you okay? Why are you crying? It is all good, I said whipping them away.

(Memory)

Do you want to dance with me? Now? Sure. -Mm-hmm. Is the song playing in the background? Mm-hmm.

I want to fly like a colorful bird- so, I do not have to be here and see the world under them, and I rush over their heads, are you going to be one-two?

If you are a birdie, I am a birdie. Come on, darling, do not do this to yourself- What are you doing? You need to hear all this, there is a thing you do not know about us. Do not. Do not! Okay then if you insist. Here we go, reading easily- Okay, okay. We were crazy about each other. Yes, we know- Okay, Daddy- Oh, and Daddy, I love him- she said here in her book quoting her life.

I want to meet her in heaven now. This young man is not going to make it.

Heartbroken he is... Okay. I am okay... Nope... he ant. Good night, Daddy, as she ran to me and left you for a night out- of fun and games.

Good- night, first kiss we had done you see this? Oh, that is lovely, dear. Her dream was like a movie- I want a big old porch that wraps around the walkway and a big old entire into the house. We can drink sugary soda and candy... nonstop. Big windows and open doors to watch the sun go down, no shade, like here.

-Do you promise? This for me? Hmm- Mm, I promise. Yes! Where are you going? Is something happening to me? Here... Always next to you. Wow... This is the part you all need to hear for sure. What is that dear? Ha-hum?

She said- make love to me. David... -Yeah?

The old-rick-at-ie Covered Bridge I waited for her to say when and where.

Did she say- David? Okay, I want you? I want you to- And it all happened... all and everything, which makes a girl a woman. And...? Did...? ... you...?

...?...?

Um...?

I know I said, the kiss... I want you to make love to me, she asked once more.

So, I did- we did- it was not easy for me- know what I was doing, and she did not. She said- you are going to have to walk me through this sex like this, it broke, she feels, so did I the kissing lots. Right.

You, all right? -Yeah, it is okay- it is okay. I asked- Did I hurt you? -No, no. Dad said we know... boy we know- it was good she had her magical boyfriend he was you, which was her dying wish, to have love and feel the love.

I am just having a lot of thoughts, like age and things. It is Okay!

I should go- over this I feel... No, I do not want you to go. I got to think... about what I did here. Come here and talk to us. You are not leaving till it is all been said.

I am so happy that you did. Um- yes. You have so much ahead of you. Yet not love, he said. It is true... I will never love another girl, at all. I am not going to have wonderful things, fancy things, sure but not her... I do not want to live without it. It is never going to happen to me. Sh-hh- boy- stop. It is not in the cards for me, don't you see it was all ripped away, like her life, why? Stop it! You are going to die too, and we do not need that on top. Oh! You know what? I am going to do it.

It is over. Okay? What is over? Come here.

The first time I ever saw her face- was...

He passed with a broken heart.

(Falling to the floor with a thud.)

Interval: 2 The Shadow of the Goddesses

Schoolchildren and entities- 'Bloody Fingers,' the dark entity kept saying to me, over my bed. 'Bloody Fingers!' The dark entity kept saying to me. 'Bloody Fingers!' I am just a girl here trying to eat! Blood dripping, dripping, from its clocked hand. I am just a 9-year-old girl trying to COME! All day and all night we are hunted.

'Bloody Fingers' the dark entity kept saying to me. It gets a loader and loader! The more I pass him out of my mind. 'I was starting to feel like they want me... to say something.' And then I hear... he cries out.

One girl screamed for her bunk bed- 'Dude gets a band-aid!'

Just another night at the castle, as schoolchildren!

~*~

'I used to ask what gives me the right to kill when I am still alive and now, they are not... and I also reason about that now and reflect more, ponder and deliberate; and say well I am not alive- am I? So thus, the killing was never- ever wrong- was it?'

1

'My eyes are not shining with the ghost of my past.' Yes, it is true that- I arranged the order to have Lance killed, in life, why back when I am guilty- yet I was anyways for being an intent, so why not... and who is going to stop me from have justice when none was given in the past. I was ordered by Nevaeh, this old gray man with a long white beard said. Dementors all-around Trius was framed for it all.

Trius took the fall for Amsel's dream boy, that could not do anything wrong- yet he was the one to do anything and everything for them. Trius took the wrap- over being who he is, Read is the lance dad- so all is explained. It is a black night out and all you can see is the lightning bolts flashing free electricity around the from tower to tower, to power everything, power lines outdated for now 100 years.

The idea of this being 19th century yet realized, I truly love- when thinking about this- as I sit looking out the window. All this comes to mind over its October 31 one more year has passed Halloween, yet another night of sacrifice, with a feast, come offerings of children. Skulls litter the land, the courtyards, held in the hands of the children are the head of their ancestors, flaming candles, flicker, on their bone craniums, dripping with hot white wax.

Dressed in classic genuine black cloaks- remembering the history of the Fomorian. 'The night of the demians, a night of a blood moon.' I was not even sure I wanted to see more killing, I have done, passed- and remorse enough over the years in this type of faith. This all appalls to the spirits from hell, having large bone firers and killing off some of the young. 'The dance of the bones.' One-star shines into light the killings... Virginia girls all under the age of 10 this year to ensure are lasting to our God, one being me, Nevaeh. Then she whispered this line, I am just a 'Shadow of the God.'

Naddalin said- 'your book was the first thing that was brought over to the unfamiliar words and these new planets, it is the bible to these people. And you are the God, what is wrong with you?'

'Everything that was past life has become your word and your teachings, to them and they see life through you!' Naddalin said just moments after the last thing she muttered.

(That night daydreaming, as a day became night, as I have done all my lives.)

Funny, something that came to my mind, drifting back into to time, like always- I was remembering the finding the gold under a tower, yet I am the one that found it, it was in the middle of tower seven of Kinzua bridge, marked by a missing anchor plat, that was placed there by the train robber, his name Trius, almost seeing this pay in my mind as it did that night, after robbing the same train that is laying on the valley floor, after a spectacular crash at that point crashing from the height the same of The Empire State Building, as it was over my head rattling coming and pushing forces far more then it could take. The steam engine- flying, steaming, wheels turning, flaming- evil-looking... 30 cars pull with its last fall, the screams of all the passengers know they are going to die, hitting the ground at 94 miles per hour.

Only one car was left- on the other far end the North End, the end that was next to my old home, the same car that Jenny was drawn to, in her death, as the viaduct claimed yet another young life, the same side that I would walk on, to look down- thinking. I had to be crazy to wake all over this thing with nothing holding me, no nets, and wind of 90 miles-per-hour, at any given moment. Seeing the tracks hanging down- and walking them not caring if I fall.

The old locative orange rusting away from the number still there, 38, below twisted within and around, the lags of the edifice, way up on the top only one old car still up there about roughly- 1,000 feet (about the height of the Empire State Building) in the air- and now and then I see the face of a young girl looking at me, yet now only existing

in my memories of all things past, I have been there many times- above and below- and in the car itself- yet my people will only hear my tails of this story- and live their lives by my spoken words- like something holy- I don't understand, after the claps, the famous red cowcatcher still showing its code of paint, faded lack lusted, like my mind, like my life, like the stories.

I could see the speeding train come on to the bride too fast for it to take as eleven towers started to give, it was leaning out more than five degrees to the eastern side, ready to tip, over Trius removed the or snapped the callers that held the legs down to the foundations snapping the 1888 anchor bolts to that tower, finally, the glow of the headlamp coming, the lights of the car windows in a soft luminosity, the driver going fast to fast for the viaduct to take, in fled; a dark and cloudy night- all the trees dusted with light fluffy snow- fairies in the air spinning in the light of my lantern as I hold like a hermit, the wind blowing out the wick of my soft glowing light- as a cold cyclone moves in recklessly, up in the fog the lights of the cars so far up overhead, rattling my ears and encases. The fifty-grand that I lived my life on and published my first copies of my books with.

'Kinzua hangs between the mountains like a frozen echo in time, then the parallels that have now converge with the bridge as it deserves into the light, skies falling in the case around then covering the ground, the day becomes night; below the steam flows as emotionless as paint as the low clouds start to hang above. The distances smear trees to shades of green... yet cover by increasingly white. The viaduct hums by the wind like fingers strumming its steel. The metal sings as if it could feel, as if locomotive are ghost drummers of mighty thunder, going accursed the ties as it hives and trills. It deceives like the reminiscences of the Pullman car contra, rival foresees like recollections, like the snowflakes that well fall forever- and whenever, in the conjures of the past that one stood, strong and tall, lasting in nothing more than endangers.'

2

Madame Pearl has taken final death, I was thinking about that too, the seas will never be the same. Her so was consolidated with this one... and we have taken on all the kids for the past and keep the history alive. That was a good death that I did. Think about the good and bad.

Ms. Molinah is the head professor of the marine biology program and magic of underwater studies - I was thinking about- this and that, Chiaz Naztherth that crazy boy and unpredictable at times, and is now- the head of the departments of those students, that once lived under the enchanted seas.

Yes, it is true I kill, I had KING WHELK OF LASSINIA, slaughtered- the story has he been found in the- boiler of a steam train, under another name- and was lit-up. All I must do is get in their head, and assassination is easy. The girl did not even- did not even know what she was doing. Ha, it is so sick to me is amusing, anything for power. Dearest Lurleen got over it, when she was asked to back down- or fail death would come. A just payback, something I never thought I would do- yet have. Yet I am the Supernatural being to Idol. I have the right to end, life afterlife and the afterlife alike.

LASSINIA is now just an underwater world- a city that reminds memories, lost in a book, that I have written- just stories within our religion. Millennialism after the end of Earth, I rewrote the bible, and all past believes have gone away- all they have is my impressions- and what faith is for my people, this understanding is just one part of the seven underworlds of the afterlife, and I am the height Deity for all this. Tangibleism is alive, and Zenthisom is the seven- spiritual enlightenment of nirvana.

‘I don’t feel holy, yet I wanted to be or feel, the love of blunt that.’ This increased my week’s thoughts. ‘THEY THINK ME AS THE CREATOR OF EVERYTHING, this is a lie.’

Yet, I have no way of explaining everything in a book, and all of life’s starts and the end is too horrifying- yet it lies in my mind- goes figure, that why places are missing. Everything for Earth was moved and has progressed, just like before with two of two- I did the same for them. It was the right thing to do, yet death- is death. No most are here lost- and I gave a home to those too, I remember what it was like... not to have a tender home, and that is what I was going for. Everyone from that story now is dead in life and lost here for as long as forever could be to the next forever.

3

(I was thinking back)

The four girls always had their eyes on me, I loosely said this for years, and I also said what they were, yet I knew that no one would believe me; they were able to transfigure, four girls into blackbirds’ crows. They were always swarming around me and picking at my flash when I was alive until I was bloody. If they could get into my eyes, I am sure they would have, no they saved that for Emmah, to get at me.

Scarier to me than the faceless children that are parts of our world, that are the child killed by abortions’ those souls come here, over the mother.

~*~

(My girlfriends)

'Lifers, they were...' I peer into all the memories, shaking my head as I stop at a traffic light, not even understanding how I got this far along. Walking with no idea I was, I stopped looking at the Markey above me. And then spinning into my sight was Naddalin- and then wings flapped and then laid down to her sides.

'High-speed flight. Yes...?'

'Yes,' Naddalin- said replying.

Let us see a show with a full three acts with a definite beginning, middle, and end, as we used to. It is not like you Naddalin, to want to spend time with me anymore.

'Why are you being so nice?'

I am not pretending it is anything more than it is, am I?

'Elody- the story of a star girl...' it said above me.

'Sounds more like a prison term than a happily ever after- really glum, yet that is how girls like lives go.'

It is like we have an expiration date, and this play made me re-think life, you know- and it is just my time- ideas, and the try overs- I will see you again, things, I promise you- I will? You are different, your lifers- even if forbidden.' Sounds like any girl's life... why is she crying...? Said Nevaeh.

'You know what I mean don't you.'

She inspects her shape on the stage- and looks at Naddalin, and said this reminds me of a girl I knew.

'Who you...?' Naddalin asked.

Looking at her hands and getting into a trance; turning her hot-pink nails the way and that, with her hands.

'It is just that you are so in tune with each other, so connected. And you see the life of a girl, that is the same as you, whispered a girl behind them.'

-And-

'I mean that- literally by the way since you're always going at it; and we like to know you, without really knowing you...'

'Like- who are you...'

The same girl, she puts her finger up to her lip and says-
'sh-h.'

The play is over, I do not say a word, just let a single tear roll down from my left eye and walk away. Now at that moment then, we were back on the streets, at twilight, I thought you said you do not feel anymore, I swallow hard, waking fast the second the light turns from not showing the hand, as it would look like days in my remembrances of the past even before I was alive, something I wanted to remember was the romance of the cities of the past, and that what I did.

At that very moment crossing the intersection with a loud screech of cars wheels looking as if for the Style in The Jazz Age of The Roaring- 1920's, yet still have the best of technologies- I thought this to be best- when the world made sense, and time was slower, stopping for us to go to the walkway, and leaving a thick trail of rubber behind them- on brick. Work was work, living was living, and time was everything that was both, and that is what I wanted for my world.

An old loving feel... and caring for all, humble, yes, yet the dark is still 'around, and there is nothing I can do about that.

But even after I sat still for a moment to think she was nowhere to be found. Besides, I am about to climb a wall in a panic, and now I feel a wisp of wind and Naddalin was gone- all I saw was the fast flash of wings, I was wondering where she could be when she appears right beside me and hands me a new teddy bear- and I blink-blink and blink once more- looking as I did when I was a young girl, her hand in mine, after that moment, I think like- I think that I have blacked out a moment or two there.

Refusing to slow at all, to the fast feelings of love, until we run into a parking lot, and I scan her eyes for what I was longing for- lost in the eyes then looking with in to fall for that mind yet once more, she was next to me always- and she is starting to show it, by being ever-so-sweet.

she asks, glancing at me and her and slings her backpack over her shoulder.

Naddalin nods.

‘A hundred and ten dollars.’

‘Um- are you crazy, some would say yes, that I am, just like you... right?’

Naddalin laughs at that very moment.

‘Don’t forget, it was fully customized just like your one from the past when you were a little girl.’

‘We could rent tickets... a steam paddleboat to cross the river, to get home?’ Emmah, always said we should do this- it is romantic, isn’t it? The big wheel and hold hands looking at the golden waves splashing to the flickers and the pulling’s of the lights on the ripples of the waters from the city- as we move down the river to the villages- and then home to the castle. And that is what they did, very much in love.

Lying in bed, with the teddy bear- she stares at her eyes practically bugging out of her head, unable to understand how anyone could do such a thing-why anyone would do such a thing, as buy one. With the connivance and trust of my hand and hand understanding I thence, fell into slumber- with a memory that was hoping to stand the test of time, within my head. Yet short thoughts too long flashbacks were something that was always an issue.

(The next day came as the light came in through the spilled pains of my windows- ten feet away from my bed.)

‘...And we have to look at the locals and be the same even if not- we have wings- that they need not see- and do as they do- without looking strange.’

‘Um, okay, so let me get the traditional looking dress on- as they would have one, I like this one it is burgundy timed in gold- fabric light and airy strands flutter around her body as if in the wind gust, hang from the corset, and when we go out today, we could see a lot more- she said.

‘So-o you just woke up and decided- to hurry and do and think this all before asking, what the hell?’ ‘Even though I love it,’ said Naddalin. Even your golden halo is showing and glowing and pulsating, face fare to angelic for this world, and lips also light shades of pink- her light brown hair glowing to the suns lights in honey tones blowing in the breeze- skin light fleshy hints of light young youthful pink casts, and shimmering as well, to the world people around you or don’t you care about exposing our world to them anymore?’

Soft like the movement of pastel colors of paint smudging the sky around her small body- looking just like Willow Shields, eyes have changed color from blue to green, wings outspread absorbing the light, gray into vivid white feathery, teddy bear embraced in both arms. Nevaeh Never looked ever more- GODDESS. The wings are changing back she said, is if you are finding hope and experiences, no longer the look of the FULLEN.

'It's all because of you,' she said to Naddalin.

Naddalin shrugs, saying 'Pretty much'- with an attitude, and deep love for her than ever finding her new hope within. 'You have a locked-in faith...' she said.

'...And the people around here are not like back home, here you can be your best and happiest ever- I feel this for why like- I am in your mind always.'

Nevaeh- 'Some call that love, mind to mind.'

'Because in case you have not noticed,' she says, practically hyperventilating now, 'things are starting to work out for you.' As if it were to hex, the moment to come, she said sheepishly.

'Some of us are a little deprived like you were in the past, yet now not so much and it all over you- being you and finding yourself and making good to your worlds and people, and all the children of the school- you role' said, Naddalin, I just said today, that I would get you to- relax- even if just for the lest little time.'

'Some of us were born to parents- some kings- some queens, and some Godets of the angles, some even born to lose, to then win, like you, so cruel is the world until you saved them all, you should be incredibly happy with yourself, and unusual they're forced to rely on the kindness of friends for the rest of their lives- and hope for a higher power as you give them, thank you- for seeing the light- and I help you- is thrilling to me, and yes, I would take the gift of your happiness- thanks!' Said Naddalin.

'Sorry.' Naddalin shrugs, about that- yet you did get all that you wanted and more. 'Guess- I had not thought about that. Nevaeh thought back and Naddalin heard within her mind.

Though if it makes you feel any better- you had loved all along you just did not want to believe that was so-so, it was all for a particularly worthy cause, what you did and have done over all these years.'

(She gives double thumbs up!)

...And a very wide smile with her head turned to one side as if making a timeless painting pose.

And when she looks at me, eyes meeting mine in that way that she has, along with the usual wave of warmth, I get the horrible feeling that ditching in the past is just the start of her plans- for world rulings, to get to know me better- I had to reprogram her mind, lost minds and walking is much better than ever before.

5

‘How would you get to school- in your past, did you start to walk?’ I ask, just as we reach the front gate where Haven is waiting, sometimes took the train as you- she points at Haven and walked and walked... the bus was detectable and as memorable as the town itself.

‘She rode the train?’

‘That was not in your story if I remember, you should add it in.’ Said Naddalin, in a whisper.

Haven then glances between us, she recently dyed and has fallen even lower, her bangs falling into her face, to make herself look normalized to the rest of the world looking at her.

‘I kid you not; I would not have believed it either, but I saw it with my own eyes she was now an angle darker than ever with her wings- yet tremendously gorgeous, she was classed as a girl forever.

Watched our footing as we climb right into the big steamer train, with all the other kids- first-year students, dorks, retards, and rejects- who that were all like us- as we were in the remembrances of the times past, then again unlike us now, now that we are older and see life to its fullest and have wisdom, and some common sense, have no other choice but to ride, in this car, all others are full to their fullest.’

She shakes her head, saying do not say it is the same- reason with yourself does not say it even if true, why everything you just said to me I need to believe is true, Naddalin.

‘Um- like is it true,’ asked Haven, ‘you used your gold bars as bricks in parts of the world to line the sidewalks and streets, you have made as pavers out of your wealth- and your people walk paths of gold bars... over you had so much gold you did not know what to do with it all?’

'Yes, yes, it is!'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

It only has worth to me, and not them... just something- I wanted to change.

'And I was so shocked by the sight of it, I blinked a bunch of times just to make sure it was streets of gold- like a distant memory of stories of the past she made them true.

And then, when I still was not convinced that this was not her idea, I snapped a pic on my cell and sent it to Jon-John who confirmed it, with an old text that was called. Revelations the ends of the world, the only part of the bible that was kept knowing where I need to go and be to save us, said Nevaeh.'

She held it up for us to see, and she read it was old and ripped at tattered pages. This is dark and odd what happened. Therefore, you became their God, right? Yet I will never say that I am the return, yet I am the chosen one. I am the Godets... not God. 'I never wanted to be worshiped- or thought of as the Queen of Queen's.'

Nevaeh- 'I never wanted bloodshed or war, over me.'

'Just love, and peace.' Said Haven.

'Why... why is the question in the story that needs means the most in answering that leads to more questions.'

That night, in the girls sitting room- I glance at Naddalin, wondering what she could- be up to, and that is when I notice she is ditched her usual cashmere sweater in place of a plain cotton tee, and how her designer jeans have been replaced with no-name plain pockets, her early look as she calls it.

'One thing I never got, with your story, was its sad Anna Kendrick was held against, and this is true, by that nut- you said this yourself- your life was made into a movie, yet it was not Anna that played you- at all it was Willow. I ask was your number one fan.'

'Anna was more like Emmah.' said Naddalin. 'Yet that is what always happens in movies, things change.

Nevaeh- 'It was- Willow's first time- having the key role... and she did it- and it was huge around the world!'

Even the brown boots she is famous for have been swapped for girly rubber flip-flops.

And even though she does not need any of that flash and dash to look as incredibly beautiful as the first day we met- the new low-key look is just- not her- I thought, or is it better?

Or at least not the 'girl' - that I am so used to.

I mean, while Naddalin is incontrovertibly smart, kind, loving, and generous- and all, she is also a hint more colorful and otiose at times.

Always preoccupied with her clothes, her image in general- along with smarts. Now she has the looks and the smarts, and I have her- and we both are the same.

Also, do not even try and pin her down on her exact date of birth, since for someone who chose to be immortal, she has a definite multi-layered past of not remembering things deep things that are ever-so hidden, and points of view and perspectives about her age- to use she is always the same age of the young teen girl. I do not mind changing bodies if I have her and her- in- me- all the way, a girl can be.

Nonetheless, even though- I normally could not care less about the clothes she wears or her ride to school look either- or the train trip style, when I look at her again, I get the horrible chink in my belly- an unrelenting push, demanding my notice- to love-dream, drift off in thoughts of lust.

A definite warning that she is merely just at the beginning of making me crazy for her. Nope, she has something to do with last night.

That the sudden transformation goes deeper than some cost-cutting, altruistic, environmentally conscious agenda.

Something, about being haunted by her karma is now over; convinced that giving up her most prized possessions- even me in the past, will somehow balance it all out and she can live in solitude, with me- Naddalin, and if trouble arises, that I will stand in for her place. ...It is a war of minds. Sometimes- the body and always taken of the soul!

‘Shall we go- the steam whistle blows?’ She smiles, grasping my hand the second the bell rings of the train, the wetness of the steam and coal dust cinders, blows around us as the wheels spin and slip three times, leading me away from Emmah and Haven, who stay

on the platform, at the station who will spend the next three phases of their time writing notes back and forth, about seeing us and hoping for the next time they do and that there missing us already, trying to determine what is up with Naddalin. (Yet we already know... don't we?)

I look at her, her gloved covering hand in mine as we heard down the hall, whispering, 'What is going on, with Naddalin others were thinking, I am sure? What happened to you?' (You and I know... yet to the outside world they do not.)

Three girls' hands and hands going down the sidewalk... look at us and say thank you for changing the minds of the world.

'I already told you.' She shrugs her hold body. 'I do not need it, this for others about being the change they need yet it is nice. It is an unnecessary sympathy; I no longer care to indulge really.' Odd how this all worked out...

She giggles, looking at me smiling. But when I do not join in, she sinkers more and shakes her head and says, 'Do not look so serious, you get the glory. And I get you, and peace of mind, it is a good trade-off.

It is not a big deal. When- I realized it is not something, I need- to have to feel complete, we walked out of a depressed area, to have all this, I would not change a thing, and I left my pride, behind, along with most of my money by the side of the road where someone can find it, that needs it more than myself.' Yet with me, they should not need, and neither should I.

'We were always smarter than them, always.' she holds up her girlfriend's hands.

I press my lips together and stare straight ahead, know at any time I can climb inside her mind, and see the thoughts she keeps all to herself, and find the underlying cause of what the is about, I understand her more than anybody else.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding the way she looks at me, despite the dismissive shrug that she gives, nothing she is said makes the least bit of sense- yet that was always the way she was and is. And- I love that, it is crazy; yet ever-so right.

'Well, that's fine and all, I mean, if that's what you need to do, then great, have fun- as you always said, and I think it's really sweet- also you're a given person.' I shrug, fully convinced that it is not

at all great, though knowing better than to say it aloud. I find a moment of contentment, walking into the sunset.

(Sometimes have passed)

Love, even to this day, is more lust than they can take to keep apart. Nevaeh and Naddalin, as their date continued. Then in the castle, in the restated book sections, with only the glow of soft lantern lights.

The smell of old paper, and leather bindings. They started to make love against, the library shelves which creaked with their movement, all the old volumes falling for the other sides. Then over 40 of them all land to the ground, wide open- all from the same writer, his name on the covers, it is common enough at such times to fantasize arriving enjoyed her slight weight on her, enjoyed being crushed under her small body.

I wanted to kiss her forever, and then, I removed all thoughts about what this was, what it might mean, what further mess passion was why I might create for myself. or the thoughts of anyone else. She wanted her soldered to her, from mouth to feet. Many shivers shake and chills run past and through her body, and she is alike.

I kissed her until true thoughts seeped out through my pores and I became a living pulse, enjoyed being crushed under her body while toiling. She wanted her soldered to her, from mouth to feet, conscious only of what I wanted to do to her.

She enjoyed all her- the weight she gives. Naked now, she lay her full length over her; only the united beat of sex and heart together can create ecstasy, of their private parts entertained rubbing one another. ...And then we were crashing around the little railway Pullman cars finding the right tracks, all hands, and lips and, oh, God, the scent and taste and feel of her.

Twisting each button below, kissing hands and fingers, shivers passed through her body. When she closed her eyes, she felt she had many hands around her, which touched her everywhere, and many mouths kissed the same, which passed so swiftly over her. Fingers soft, running his finger along her breastbone.

At last, with an angle sharpness of heavenly, then her teeth sank into each other's fleshiest parts. Likewise, kissing her just above her pubic bone, she slipped two fingers inside her, the darkness swirling around her small hole. Not only did she spit and like is my girl hole and spilled into two lines parted, but she also did the same to my butt hole, too. -It felt so good-!

And, then I licked the clear goo-ing girlie-come off her two longest fingers, that thick wetness, was bridging between them playfully, and at that moment was far too tantalizing not to try, that she had in front of my face to show me, as she was making scissors fingers of the goo-ing, of her warm love.

When her shirt finally felt open, she studied her, then touched her breasts. Could not have cared less if she thought the same things or way- Naddalin licked her nipples, then moved his lips slowly down her stomach, minds locked in the moment was more than any other thoughts they had. It was the love of the mind more than a body.

Then supreme Naddalin who has the mind of Nevaeh within her body, as if placement flip-flopped, runs out into the hard-pouring rain, nude for the love they made just moments before with no care in the world other than love and freedom of expression.

Her arms to the graying cloud-covered skies above. then she takes a full 1 billion volts in a white cracking blot of lighting to their head, as her wings are outstretched, (I scream saying run, yet she stands unmoved.)

Then the oddest thing happens as if she has dissipated all the power if the blot into her body as more power to keep her alive for that many years, the wings of her body arching with extreme voltage, wildly wrapping around the feathers of the wings, themselves, she was glowing with power, and it was going into her mind- as energy for remembrance. The clock tower bells ring- out the time of midnight.

Then moments after she and Naddalin went into the steamy Roman bathhouse, with nude cherub angels playing Instruments, that is enchanted and welcoming to use, in soft white stone, lined all around the pool edge along with two lion and lamb statues also animated, with many fire bowls, likewise with many cascading glasses of waterfalls falling on young bodies.

The bathhouse is enclosed by walls, yet open to the skies above in twinkling stars. Also, light by flaming lanterns, with the backlights of many arched stain glass windows, lining the length of the long room shin and sheening many assorted colors, that are dancing on the young nude little girls ages- seven and up to twenty-five, over one hundred nude schoolchildren were waking and bathing around them in the shallow 3-foot hot waters.

Nudity is not something that well has a shame of in this world, not even thought of as wrong, and why should it be? Multi-colored roses were all around inside and out, everything lush, fervent, keen, passionate, vehement, zealous, and most agog.

Naddalin and Nevaeh the two of them having crazy humping movements of not being able to stand not having it and making the pussy kissing together, as both their legs apart and prevents touching to the point of smashing down on and in, in lovemaking in the morning's hours, as her hip molds with her hip, kissing like as the meet.

The soft skin that Naddalin has those hands no more than two inches from herself have been now rubbing and going in Nevaeh, her love now dripping into the 0.5906 inches, or 1.5-centimeter tight pink opening of the vaginal hole, warm and lustful.

(The next day)

Let us get out of here and go shopping. We have earned it.

I gape, shaking my head- um I do not think so-o, I hardly could believe my ears. And since when do you worry about cost, Missy.

She looks at me, amused by my surge of lighter, which is not exactly the reaction I had prearranged on.

‘But just how are you planning to get around now that you’ve ditched the train and don’t have a ride?’

‘I mean, in case you haven’t noticed, this is not back home where you can run around freely, what do you plan on doing, you can’t get anywhere without having a motorbike, would you like to rent one?’

‘Like- I am some shallow, money-oriented, self-absorbed, buyer-driven snob?’

I thought you would already know this.

‘No!’ I cry, shaking my head and squeezing her hand.

Hoping to convince her even though, I did mean it- not being mean yet truthful in a way of conveying. Only not in a slumber way like she thinks, or you even would feel- like.

Then just like the words ‘KILL, KILL, I- WE Kill the final time, pay attention played hauntingly in her head, yet it was in the mind of Naddalin, and then transfer at the same time in the mind of Neveah linked. ‘Nothing to worry about, just past evils that will never give up.’ Said Nevaeh.

‘Always something or someone to end the moments,’ said Nevaeh. At one time, she had my old boyfriend appreciates the finer

things in life kind of thing, and she has always taken a man's place with me in my heart, and less in my girlfriend's mind to I worry anymore about them, now she is the version I have of safety and comfort of what I am looking for in that kind of way, even if a girl. 'She is my rock!'

'I just- UM.'

I squinted, wishing I could be even half as eloquent as her. Yes, still forging ahead when I say, 'I guess some just don't get it, we never feel love like we have- and I feel sadden for them.' I shrug at her, eyes meeting. I raise her ruby and diamond-covered hand intertwined with gold, with all the chain she had that crisscross overtop to where I can see the top of her hand to kiss, to make her feel even safer with me. (Contentment is everything with some else, I always thought.)

The bonds between ourselves and another person belong only in our minds. Memory, as it grows fainter, loosens those times before- your own keep or not, and not without trying to keep the good, the bad sometimes creep over top of other evils wanting to still your joy, the illusion by which we want to be a hoax and which, out of love, friendship, politeness, deference, obligations, we hoax other induvial, we exist alone.

A woman like us is the creature who cannot escape from herself, and her past, who knows other people only in herself, and when she asserts the contrary, she is lying. ...And that is how I look at her past my past, and what was in the past, making less tragic recalls of all things that are now past. Alleged Naddalin.

Whispered thoughts of the mind- 'The bonds between ourselves and another person exists only in our minds.' Recalling things in life and the afterlife may not always be the same as you once remembered.

Ha, grief is what develops the powers of the mind, and happiness is just a state of it like grief as well, yet happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is sadness that makes the brilliants of mind.

'The true meaning to us of how little time and place matters is the feeling of undying love.' That was what Nevaeh said back to me in my mind.

That night in the middle of the night, I walked along the wall of macabre young girl bones- of hips, arms, legs, and heads, oh my- of 4-foot-high, remembering death for some, it is just the way it is, death is death even in the afterlife. Bodies only last so long, and only I can last for all time.

Then I started thinking about a girl that I knew, that was close to my hometown, like touching her bones that lay here, with all the others, she may not have made it as one of us, fallen yet her story is worth sharing.

The story oddly starts long before she was born.

‘December 9, 1930, I slowly opened my eyes, to the world of the wandering around me, kicking and screaming like a newborn hearing, my name for the first-time, Giovanni.’

‘Um- to tell you the truth, I don’t remember, if my dad was there or not, my mother never- ever- like really said, along with not saying much about it, mainly for he was hard at work for the money was not there, for us you see we- were poor.’

‘Oh, yes, it’s a- exceedingly small Italian town called: Pettorano Sul Gizio.’

‘I remember my dear sweet mother telling this story, and my older brother as well, of how she gave birth to me in a one-bedroom house, or most would call a wooden shack, that what- and I call it.’

‘Not to be too graphic, but- a, her legs were all- an apart onto hay bales, she was crying louder and louder, then I was, back in those days you did NOT have anyone there, like to help with this kind of thing, it just happens.’

‘I am lucky to be-a here with you now.’ He spoke.

‘My life was hard, but- a worth it, I cannot- complain really.’

‘One- I am an Italian American.’

‘Two- I am- a getting older and feel, that- and I have lived a good life.’

‘It’s all an articulate plan of happiness and sad moments, lost in time really with me, hey what can- I say, they’re all in my mind still...’

‘Um yes, even at the time-worn age of eighty-five years young.’

‘Sometimes, I look at these kids coming up and think to myself, how things have changed, like me, also, I cannot- spell or write much, yet that doesn’t mean, that I am not smart.’

‘Unlike you- I can’t use a computer, I wouldn’t even know how to turn one on, yet- a, that is okay.’

‘Um- you live, and you learn, as you go.’

‘Come what may for another day, and who- is to say what stays with you forever, and never go away.’

‘Even old age can’t take that away.’

‘It is locked in your memories; all you have to do is find a way to get them out.’

(He looks at me...) ‘That is why you’re here, writing all my stories of stories down in this book you say you can write for me.’

(I will do that for you...) I spoke.

‘What can I- say, when I was three years of age, I was living with my grandmother, there was a complication, that made it hard to part with my mother, yet it was- what had to be done, at the time.’

‘She was overworked and working for all of us, and just could not keep up with it all health-wise.’

‘I remember, the winters they were so-o cold it felt like a knife cutting open your face.

‘Yet, nothing like here in the small town of Hasting’s Pennsylvania, as you can see, I am a-talking to you in my little apartment- it is a nice, no?’ (Yes, yes- it is...) I whispered.

(I glanced and said also: ‘I am glad to be talking with you.’

I- was sitting there with a 1911 Underwood Typewriter curiosity not sure what he would say next.’

‘I look outside with him, it’s nice here, yet not at all like back when I was a small boy, climbing the tree for the hell of it and picking things off it all to eat- yes know.’

‘Um plus just see how high I could go.’

‘I went back with my mother at the age of ten or so, we didn’t have much at all-you see.’

‘I really... loved being a child, yet that did not last long... Speaking of that, like- we sleep all together on the floor on leaves and grass.’

‘With an open firebox in the middle of the one-room place, my dad used to make his charcoal, laying wood, mud, and levels together.’

(Ah- hum...) I said, frantically typing it away. Remember, nights where I was, that I wish, I had had something to cover with yet did not-a.’

‘I remember, wearing the same outfit from the age of ten until my teen years back.’

‘Yes, surely as you could imagine full of holes and not smelling the best really.’ ‘There was no shit house, you found some random bush, and wiped with the left hand.’

(NICE!) is what I said, raising a brow.

‘That is too much, yet it is absolutely true, he said, sighing.’

‘Funny, it’s like- I could see my dad up in the hills... doing this... he shows the movement, of cutting down these big old trees.’

‘It was kind of like his job, yet nobody works, and the work you did want really for the dollar, it was to keep life- going- yes, see?’ Though, I had a tough time making a living... my dad had a little harder than me... yet, I wonder that now.’

(Say more about him) I alleged.

‘What can- I say, he was a good man, though with a lot of things, you have to let the past behind you, and sometimes loved one also.’

7

(Tree- limb)

‘I remember, the one time, I and this young girl, where she and I went to high, and the branch broke snapping it off... with me... and my small arms hanging on it, I nearly fall on my ass and broke it, I did.’

‘Idiota Ragazzo,’ she said.

(Her)

‘My Grannie was not at all pleased with me, it was like a twenty-foot drop or so-o.’

‘What-a can I say, I was the rough and ready type of younger ‘Ragazzo’ a- boy?’

‘Sorry- for me speaking so broken, as you see, I never really learn how to read or write so- ‘good.’

What- smarts I-a got I tough- myself.’

‘I mean look at me now, I am and an older man.’

‘Yet, look at this photo, see what I once was, look at the black hair, I once had, not- a so much there now, oh well what- a can you do that’s- a life.’

‘Maybe they’ll let me get my Cadillac back and I get can- an out and see the world one more time, as you see my days are getting shorter, yet I feel good.’

‘You know, I have all loved the Cadillac- my first was a 1962 Deville, nothing like the shitty looking things we have today.’
‘Oh-well- at- this point... I do not have anything to my name, and I am still not sure, what I want to be printed on my headstone... that’s- a life too no?’

‘Life is amazingly full of wonder, slander, and sometimes hurt- you’ll see what I mean.’

‘Just start calling me John, everybody does.’

‘Um- yet once again, that’s- a life, it goes by so fast- kid, look at- you-you’re- young and have so much to see.’

‘It’s just the name that stuck with me over the years, I don’t-a know why, just a good English sounding name- ah- so I went with it, kind of thing.’

‘I remember, spending my teen year in Rome, kind of on my own, yet, when I look back on it now, I was kind of always alone.’

(Got yes) I said, nodding.

‘I have had loved, and I have had the loss. Oh, and I have loved another with all my heart and soul, mind, and body.’

‘Yet there was more than one love in my life.’

‘What-a can I say, I love all the woman, some you love like your mother in that- away, and some you love in another ways, like all my friends and friends.’

‘I have made over the years; here eating nice meals, three times a day, at The Beaver Street Café, breakfast lunch, and dinner.’

‘Um- I am a typical guy, who has worked hard and lived life, a normal life.’ ‘I love to tease the girls here serving the food to me, I know I am too old to get a young date, but what the heck can I try right?’

‘I feel as if they think, I'm like their grandpa or something, heck I don't feel that old.’

‘What can I say, I am kind of a flirt, but I like to have an enjoyable time, that is what it is all about having fun, is it not?’

‘I do not dislike anybody, nor does anyone dislike me.’

‘I would say, I feared leaving my homeland, but it was something to think strongly about.’

(The movie)

‘I mean heck, it was a new land, I was lost in a sea in a rainstorm, were knobby could understand me hard when I looked up at "The Statue of Liberty," when I was- oh boy, like nineteen or so...’ ‘Um- like we got lost on the trip over to New York, on a ship or more like a pedal boat called: "The Conto Brackenko..."’

(‘Don't ask me how to spell it, yet, let me try- I think that is it.’)

(I went with it)

(Back)

‘Before I get into that-a, let me talk some about Pettorano Sul Gizio my little hometown.’

(Sure! Go for it.)

‘I remember, the steam trains rolling all night and all day, I recall hopping on them from time to time, I have this remembrance a lot anymore.’

‘Then again there was this bridge with stone arches and the town sat way up on the hill, a long walk yet that is how we did the long walking from place to place, you were rich if you had a car.’

‘I mean we had our ass's, chickens, and ducks, yet you had to have money for that also.’

‘And if you wanted food on the table, you have to trade and pick what you wanted, it was this or that.’

‘I can hear the train cars linking up, and the whistleblowing, the light in the cars fascinated me for you could understand something clearly at last glowing and to me, that was something neat to see on the long summer nights.’ ‘We did not have power in our home, there were no phones, and there was no running water, what water, I had we bright in for a hand pump far down the dusty lane all downhill, all up to the other way.’

‘Yet, my heart is back there some time, I mean it was all I knew, and 'till I found out what having a U.S life was all about.’

(N.Y - WWII)

‘The world movies a little faster in New York.’

‘I kind of find it funny, I missed being in two different wars, it was around the time of WWII and I was drafted, yet, because of me not have the background, I need, I was told, that I was not needed, and that was simply fine by me, I was not really into all that junk anyway; not that I would not fight for my country, I would yet that was not what I wanted to come over here.’

‘What can I say nothing ever comes out-a fighting like fools? I worked in an Italian restaurant, it is not right, we are all the same really.’

‘On the other hand, before getting into all that, I was walking the streets, just looking for someone to give me a job.’

‘I was not complaining, yet, living homeless is not the greatest thing.’

‘I had nothing, I had a new wife, and I would say- I loved her... yes, but it was an arranged marriage, so I could be here in the U.S.’

‘What can you do she was beautiful, everything a man would want really.’

‘She was sixteen when we first met, and it was not loved at first sight, yet we made it work.’

‘She came over to me, and I got to see her when she was about seventeen, yet she was living with someone else.’

(Rocky love)

‘What can you do, I was not mad about it, I just went on doing what I do.’

‘That all ended, and she came back to me, and me being who I am, said yes once more.’

‘That is one thing about me, I have always been too forgiving, yet that is what love is all about.’

‘Ah- let me close my eyes and look back into the past, I can see her there, standing in front of me, and this was not long after we were married before she had to leave me.’

‘We- she and I- let us just say we made love for the first time. It was nothing fancy not like what I hear some of these kids saying- ‘they do today.’

‘You kissed you touched each other’s bodies, things like that, I am a romantic after all.’

‘I was on top of her, kissing her the whole time, she was in some pain, yet she- loved it not long after the first thrust.’

‘She never really said that she loved me, yet we had a type of love where you did not need to say it aloud.’

(Moving forward)

‘Heck sleeping naked was what you did anyways in the sizzling summer days in New York in the 1950s. Or you would roast to death, it helped some with the passion.’

‘I don’t remember, it all, nevertheless- if I look back on it, I do- I have to blow the cobwebs off my brain- kind of like looking into an old scrapbook.’

‘I look out and see the sun shining out my frosted window, and I see my day go by ever so slowly.’

‘I’ve led an ordinary life.’

‘There are no memorials dedicated to me and my name will soon be ancient history, but I’ve loved another with all my core, feel of mind and soul, and to me; this has always been sufficient.’

‘The optimists would call this a love mushy love story yah-a not really, the pessimists would call it-a heartbreak.’

‘Yet it worked okay... seeing her long black hair laying on top of her breast with some skin shown and her nipples through, looking shy with big brown eyes.’

‘Yet wanting me and all that, she was on the bed, I kissed up her legs, feeling all of her with my fingertips, it was after all the first time, it was an important thing for me also see as it happened, I was not living with her, yet I was sleeping there some night, yet nobody knew.’

‘This was the first that stands out the most to me, the first time, I was ever in a bed like this, so it was one neat night.’ ‘She was a virgin at seventeen, me I am not going to say, yet I did all I need to do, I never had someone say it was wrong, and she became pregnant to me, and I never saw my little girl, until- I came over sometime later.’

‘Really, I never even knew was pregnant she went back I stay it was all craziness, yet maybe I didn’t know as much as I thought I did about make- love- either- a lost thought rolling around in his head.’

‘Really If I did, I would have found some way to make it over and Gaetanina and my little one.’

‘In my mind, it’s a little bit of both, and no matter how you choose to view it, in the end, it-a does not change the fact that it involves a great deal of my life and the path I’ve chosen to follow.’

‘I have no complaints about my path and the places it has taken me; enough complaints to fill a circus tent about other things, maybe, but the path I have chosen has always been the right one, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way.’

‘Time doesn’t make it easy to stay on the right pathway that is long and not all way sight.’

‘There are difficulties hills and mountain valley. The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime.’

‘Until three years ago, it would have been easy to ignore, but it’s impossible now.’

‘There is a sickness rolling through my body; I’m neither strong nor healthy, and my days are spent like an old party balloon: listless, spongy, and growing softer over time.’

‘I look out all the time and see all the faces going by it’s nice, I feel okay in this old body.’

‘Yet, I don’t feel, as if I am all that old, it’s getting colder out yet.’

‘I feel the same on the inside getting colder as the days pass ever so slowly and feel as if they are getting longer and my life is getting shorter.’

‘I want to do something, so you all remember who I am, yet I am not sure how to do that, I ran into this younger man Named: Marcel Ray Duriez, and he said-a; ‘I will do this for you.’’

(...and I did.)

‘And I was overjoyed that someone would care about some like me, just your ordinary Italian man, living in Hastings Pennsylvania.’

‘That was one a big-time chef back in the old century, and New York City back in the fifths.’

(Really...?)

‘I sit in this restaurant called: 'The Beaver Street Cafe' and I see faces come and go, I think- I know then all, they all know me, I am so easy to get to know- yeah- no.’

‘They all rushed by saying hi, in and out the door.’

‘Some even sit with me, I love to flirt with the girls that serve the food to me, I am a sexy man after all just look- an at me, I still got it.’

‘I like the kid, I even asked him for a shot of brandy, (being me) and we talked, and he typed, I was never much of a reader or writer, yet he is.’ ‘I see him taking notes on the typewriter and I wonder-a what my story is going to say... even I don’t get it sometimes.’

‘I walk on wood floors, wood classed dark wood wall coverings.’

‘Do you like my hair? It is graying yet it is all there is it a not.’

‘Like most my age of 85, I got most of my hair, though I’m the only one in the cafe this morning.’

‘They are like in this room I start to feel lonely and long for my wife the first one that I had.’

(Kids)

‘Yet, I love them both yet can remember their names, alone except for the girls in the back, but they, like me, yet they have their own busy lives- ‘yet- a that’s life.’

‘I was that way too when I was young- but- an age slows you-ah down, what- a heck, I am okay with it I have to be- NO?’

‘A minute later, the door has been propped open for me, as it usually is, my nurse comes down to sit and talk, asking if I would like coffee, ‘It’s-a fine, everything it’s-a fine.’

‘That saying has almost become routine to me.’ ‘Now there are two others in the room, and they grin at me as they come in and pass as they move in and pass by.’

‘Good morning, they both say one a young boy and a teen girl...’

‘They say with cheerful expressions, and I’d take a moment to ask about the kids and the schools and an oncoming end to their vacations.’

‘They get saddened by me saying their fun day is ending.’

‘I don’t like making a kid feel that way- yet-a that is life, it’s not, not always fun, yet I’d like to keep happy, I see her walk to a table I see her crying for a minute or so.’

‘They do not seem to notice, that I look with concern; even see me doing this yet have become numb to it, but then again that my life, looking for others, what the heck that is just the way I am.’

‘A person can get used to anything if given enough time.’

‘Time is everything and yet nothing all at the same time.’

‘I cough, and through squinted eyes, I check my watch.’

‘I realize it is time to go.’

‘I stand from my seat by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the desk to pick up the scrapbook, I have looked through a hundred times. I do not glance through it.’

‘Instead, I slip it beneath my arm and continue my way to the place I must go. I hear the muffled sounds of crying in the distance and know exactly who is making those sounds.’

‘Then the nurses see me, and we smile at each other and exchange greetings.’

‘They are my friends, and we talk often, but I am sure they wonder about me and the things that I go through every day.’

‘I listen as they begin to whisper among themselves as I pass.’

‘There he goes again,’ I hear, ‘I hope it turns out well.’

‘But they say nothing directly to me about it.’

‘I’m sure they think it would hurt me to talk about it so early in the morning and knowing myself as I do, I think they’re probably right.’

‘Until three years ago, it would have been easy to ignore, but it’s impossible now.’

‘There is an illness developing through my body; I am neither strong nor steady, yet I feel extremely healthy, however, I know that is not so, and my days are spent will, I am not allowed to drive anymore, yet I want to the TV is on, yet I do not care to look, I don’t even care who the president it is- what was his name? ‘Osama?’ ‘Or is it, Obama?’ I do not know either way- do you? It is all the same for me.’

‘I cough and look out my living room window and through peeking eyes out the window blind, I check my watch the kid playing in the park next door and hear the splashing of the pool, what joy that brings to me.’

‘I realize it is time to go back over next to and get lunch now shrimp or something like that- I don’t care it’s all good to me.’

‘I love to sit here in my old lazy boy chair it’s, okay by me too- what the heck-a.’

‘I get up something take a few jabs at it I stand by seat getting stable footing- by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the desk to pick up the photos of the past...’

‘I have looked over than a hundred times, it could have been more I don’t remember, yet I recall it all.’

‘I do not glance through it the scrapbook of timeworn photos so that I don’t remember ever seeing, yet I am sure, I have my nurse said, I have, and it was not more than a week ago.’

‘Instead, I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go.’

‘I sit for just a second and stare at her, but she doesn’t return the look.’

‘I appreciate all that she does for me, yet I know who I am.’

‘She doesn’t need to think I do, I don’t- like that.’

‘Sometimes, she forgot more than I know.’

‘I’m a stranger to her, she doesn’t get people like do.’

‘Then, turning away, I bow my head and pray silently for the goodwill I know I will require keeping going on.’

‘I have always been a firm believer in God and the influence of good hope, all the same, to be honest, my faith has made a list of questions- some I don’t get and some that I do- I want to be answered before I’m gone, and no one remembers why.’

‘Afterward, I sit in the chair that has come to be shaped like me. They are finishing now; her clothes are on, but still, she is crying. It will become quieter after they leave, I know.’

‘The excitement of the morning always upsets her, and today is no exception.’ ‘Finally, the shade is opened, and the nurses walk out.’

‘Both of them touch me and smile as they walk by.’

‘I wonder what this means.’

‘I lastly assumed what true love is and what it stands for... love is meant for caring for another person's contentment more than your own, no whatever to the problems life may bring forth or the longing pains the choices you face might be to love or walk away.’

‘Now and again, you have to be away from individuals you love, but that doesn't make you love them any less if anything it make that bond stronger.’

‘I mean-a, if the association can't endure the long-term with problems, why would it be worth my time and energy for the short term that is how I always felt both times I fell in love.’

‘I remember, when- her lips met mine, dancing out under the cafe' overhead roofs back in my hometown.’

‘I remember, when ironically it was playing on my old radio- I was young and so were you, and time stood still, and love was all we knew, you were the first, so was I, we made love and then you cried Remember when.’

‘I remember, when- we vowed the vows and walked the walk, made all the small talk, that we said we would never part yet that is just what happen she stayed behind I fled to the US, there was a war coming fast- with a gun blast- I had to move fast.’

‘I gave my heart one and once only back then, made the start, it was hard to even leave my mother behind, she was all that was in my life at the time.’

‘The sensation of emptiness is what breakdown your heart is sometimes the very one that mends’ - it's-a what was broken, I have lived and learned, life threw curves there was joy, there was hurt.’

‘The first time I saw your face, I saw your eyes shine into mine, and the moon and the stars were the light we need to see, it was love at first sight even if it was all arranged.’

‘I remember the dark and the endless skies and being with my love.’

‘I realize the odds were not there for me, always against me. Just like old ones died and new are born rearranged, disassembled, and changed forever, ‘yet that’s- a life.’

‘We came together, fell apart, and broke each other’s hearts- I remember when and the first time, I ever saw your face.

The earth moves with you like you are the trembling heart.’

‘If you don’t go for whatever you want, you’ll never have whatever you need in your heart.’

‘If you don’t ask this dumb question, you’ll never really have the dumb answer, if you don’t step forward and look back, you’ll never have the solution that was always there looking at you in the freaking face, it’s like photos of the past all in a timeline, there the answer to what you did right and what you did wrong, like a sad lonely old country song.’

‘In life, there are many things out of your control, that is where the hand of God takes over if you step in you can do harm and you can make it pity or a tragedy.’

‘But science is not the total answer; this I know, this I have learned in my lifetime. And that leaves me with the belief that miracles, no matter how mysterious or implausible, are real and can transpire without concern for the ordinary order of things.’

‘So yet again, just as I do daily, I begin the same routine, doing all the same thing except on Saturday, in the hopes that the miracle will come, of being active as if I were young once more to dominate my life and triumph majestically, splendidly, and marvelously.

Yet-a that is not going to happen- I-a know that. Besides maybe, just maybe, it will, or I could just remember when- the rest of my days.’

9

‘FEAR- stands for everything and so face it do not run- I never had a fear of anything or anyone everyone loves me, or so I feel. I remember... been fresh out of high school, not a day over ten years.’

‘I had five cents to my name, I was still living at home, but not for long. I was a virgin yeah- and nay, to the world! I never saw anything other than farmland.

I did not know what I was in for. Yet I had to go...'

'Hitler was taking over, killing babies and bring them alive of all things.'

'I will never forget the sounds of the troop train steaming through, dropping off more maggots like me to kill the Nazis.

Knowing that ninety percent of them would not make it back home.'

'I'd never thought I would live this long, and I never thought young-ins would doubt the war and the Holocaust.'

'I have seen men, women, and kids being lined up on their knees and shot in the back of the head, for no reason at all. It is incredible, tragic, and despicable, how one man's loathing can start so much destruction.'

'I do believe that history is going to repeat; it is just a matter of time. I just hope I can fish this story with you all before I have fished myself.'

'Then- It was the summer of love, sex, drugs and rock, and roll. Flower power was in the air, and I had hippie long hair.'

'This is what I remember about summer love in 1969.'

'Jim Morrison was flashing his adulthood, and the taxing way to Paris, Hendrix was rewriting 'The Star-Spangled Banner' in a high voltage screech.'

'Man- You could feel it in the air people waited to fight or freak, love or kill- all part of a thrill.'

'Vietnam was right outside the door... love, drug, or hug...

Man- sides were being selected.'

'The world was yelling for the change, girls ran naked in the mud, babies sucking away no one cared, and there was orgy everywhere you look, and girls that would blow your mind for free.'

'Humorous it seems like you were tripping over something and on something- man.'

‘All the colors- man, do you see the colors when you look into the eyes of the sun- man, look without a fear- man or it will kill you- man. 69-man! Far-Out!’

(Older)

‘Remember when the sound of little feet, yet my girls both grow up the kids do, and they have their own lives, I don’t interfere.’

‘I vowed we’d never give it upon them, yet they did on me.’

‘I remember when I-a remember when forty seemed so old- yet that’s- a life! looking’ back, it is just the steppingstone in my hometown, overgrown trees, and winding hills, money was not something you need over there, yet it was something I needed to find in the U.S.A?’

‘I was living in a cardboard box in 1952, and looking for a job, yet could not find one for I could not read or write to save my life- yet-a that’s just the ways of my life.’

‘Haunted love- I was finding yet another woman to fill the long and lonely nights, she was all right I loved her, nevertheless- I was not in love as much.’

‘I knew that I could live to be a hundred yet maybe- Like Marcel said- maybe- like why is a question that has known answer, and visit every country in the world, but nothing would ever compare to that single moment when I first kissed the girl of my dreams and knew that my love would last forever.’

‘I look at the old typewriter that I have never used on my desk it is missing the letters ‘A’ and ‘N’ not the button itself, I want to do this all my life and this kid is doing it for me, and what gets me is that it was written in a day.’

‘Okay, then I look at the fingers are a fly in a great heist. I do not get it. I sometimes stop over to the library and see all the old books and I have never cracked one, in my long life, I wonder what they all say yet I know, it is like my life.’

‘There was a lot they did not tell you about death-

I would not know I have not died yet- I want to live.’

‘I feel that when we grow up or even hit our twenties, we lose the talent for loving without limits, and I see this looking at what I am seeing.’

‘I put all the photos on the table some fall to the floor like my thoughts and heart- for a moment while the scrapbook is open. It takes four licks on my twisted finger to get the threadbare cover open to the mid-page.’

‘Then I put the glass back into place somewhat downward on my nose.’ ‘There is always a moment right before I begin to flip-flop the pages, and I see the story come to life like a black and white movie, within my hoary mind and I wonder to myself what a wonderful world, and what’s it happens today?’

‘I don’t know I really-a don’t-a care, it’s all the same, for me now; for I never know beforehand, that life is routine and then more routine, and then you get institutionalized.’

‘Yet that- life,’ a mixture of all the stuff you can take blended, making you feel constipated, sometimes nauseated- or I lovesick and miss my wife’s, both at various times of the day.’

‘Deep down it does not matter, I feel I don’t need anyone I am okay on my own- I keep saying that to myself.’

‘It’s the possibility that keeps me going, not the guarantee, a sort of stake on my part.’

‘And though you may call me a dreamer or fool or any other thing, anything is possible.’

‘I remember, being three years old living with my mother- who was my grandmother and seeing the small one-room house that was just a wood shake, I remember being the age of nine clubbing tall trees and busting my ass.’

‘I remember having to grow up too fast.

I remember sleeping on hay beds, and making an open fire on the inside, I remember not even having real windows, or a door, I remember going for long walks just to get the water needed to wash an outfit, and I remember it all.’

‘I recall not having a bathroom and going in the woods, it was not until I was told that we had the outhouse. I remember having a job over in the old county of cutting down fields by hand with a long-bladed knife.’

‘We all sleep together to keep from freezing, there were three girls at my feet and five older boys next and almost on top of me.’

10

‘It was early October 1944, and I left home, never to look back on a steamship- Some time has passed, I see the page turn- not the photos I am a dad, my one girl, on my shoulders at this point- with my new wife next to me, damn I wish I could remember her name too.’
‘Something- and I remember everything about that but, why? Is my mind slipping- I think not, I need a drink and may-a-be I will remember?’

‘I never called her anything but her nickname I gave her- ‘My-Love.’’

‘I see little feet running around the apartment she is there a wild little shit.

Yet- that part- an of life- no?’

‘I could watch my wife doing anything and everything, so was all I ever wanted, yet I never really looked around at that time, or maybe I was, I mean I’m-a good looking guy even now- the fading a girl is not that hard to do with you look like this.’

‘The lady’s love me, for me, ha- and I never changed. I sit here in the evenings flipping through the endless channels nothing like 300 nothing really on that I like, yet there are- some old shows on TV- land, I remember especially working hard all day in a cafe in New York, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction.’

‘It was how he relaxed, a routine he’d learned from his father.’

‘Romance is thoughtful thoughts about your momentous other when you are supposed to be thinking about something otherwise. I like to look at the trees and their reflections in the room and on the river, back when I was younger, I had a photo somewhere.’

‘Let us see if I can move to that page without this thing falling completely apart.

Look nowhere in Hasting’s the trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shadow, and hue in between, just like look at all the ducks on the river running not far away.’

‘Their glittering colors glow with the late evening sun bring on the dusk and midnight sun, and for the hundredth time, I see my first wife as if she were starting next to me as I get into bed.’

‘As I put the book down and rest my aching head, to hopefully have another day to do it all again, however that may not happen.’

‘The days are slowly being taken away from the big man upstairs.’

‘Yet then again- ‘that’s-a life.’

‘Originally it was the main house where I met my first wife, she was rich I was poor I was on a working plantation for hardly anything- yet, I had her love to pay for my needs, I did not have two pennies to rub together, yet I fell head over heels for her, I got my apartment about right after the war concluded around 1945.’ ‘The date may not be right, yet they work for me, this is the way they have to be, spent the last fourteen months and small fortune repairing it, like \$500, yet it’s better than the cardboard box in the street next to a flaming barrel.’

‘The place is old, built in the 1900s or so- I do not know. I get the rug from someplace- and I do not remember how it got in here I had to cut it up, French or something like that- yet what you do not have you have to find some way or another to keep the little brown hair wife-ie, and little ones that look like her happy, and needing you.’

‘Both girls- I don’t have anyone to pass on this good name...’

‘Oh- well that’s- a life- is it not?’

‘I have never even had an article, about me why would someone what to read my story anyways- I am nothing amazing.’ ‘Do you know how many ways love can smash you; I do? It makes you happy, and it makes you glum?’

‘It makes you gruesome in the abdomen or hurt in the heart.’

‘It makes everything upbeat and sharper, or it hazes all the limits.’

‘It makes you feel like a monarch or a chump.’

‘Every way love can stick you; it's hit hard when it comes to you, or she with you.’

‘It's hard to resist a good girl when you want to be a bad boy.’

‘That a photo no one gets to see but me,

I remember her before, I got married.’

‘Yet her name passes before me also.’

‘I had many girlfriends over the years, but never another love of my life; I have some nicking too, yet you don't want to know all the stuff... maybe, later, I'll talk about that.’

‘My last apartment sat on zero acres yet is adjacent to a creek-sh like a river called the Susquehanna, sometimes, I think I will go for a walk over to the park- and then I think not. It not far- yet it is for me.’

‘I see all the dry leaves- falling to their roots of the tree, I see all the falling leaves, I see meter posts just there, they never work, I see my white ‘caddie’ (Cadillac) in the back not running, it is-a running- but not for me. I drink a glass of hot coffee, and then shower, it is the start of the same day, or so, I think. I have the oldies on and that is good enough for me.’

‘My nurse walks in, saying- ‘It's looking good today-John.’ ‘What was-a that?’ I said back in a hast...

‘I always showered at the start of the day, the water washing away all the paint off and aching in my body.’

‘I am too damn young to be in a nursing home!’ That was my thought of being an old devil.

‘I'm-a, not that messed up- yet!’ I thought.

‘Afterwards, I combed my grayish back hair, put on some faded jeans and a long-sleeve yellow shirt, I don't have a porch on the front it's getting colder anyway, I may just sit in the back, where I am setting now there is no view, what- so- ever back here, where I sat every day at this time, before walking ever to the café to eat eggs and toast, or something along those lines.’

‘Yet again- ‘that-a, is my life.’

The girl- 'I see him as he stretched his arms above his head and winking at me, gently sloping his shoulders up and down as he completed the routine, of making the move from one door down to the other.'

'I see some random kid ringing the bell by the cash register over and over sounding like the old steam trains, that ran through here in the past, and it-a was not-a that-long-ago.' 'John reached for his coffee cup, remembering his father as a boy saying- it to Kristian, thinking how much he missed him, yet never really got to see him all that much.'

'He occupies yourself once by, saying 'you look cute today,' he adjusted his suspenders as her face turn bright red, then fool around again, saying...'

Then he spotted me- The girl...

'Do you have a boyfriend?'

Then he started talking to Kristen once more- about her young life- 'This time it sounded about right, about how- he knew that I have a little seven-year-old girl named- Riley and not move on- her child, 'she is my love in my life now, and he began to play with my words coming out of my mouth- so he flirts- yet it is sweet.'

'Until now- I sit down for some time yet, I must work. Soft country music is not so quiet in the background, yet whatever.' 'Giggling laughter creasing my eardrums, and my teeth slip somewhat out.'

'So much for getting a date at this point.' I thought.

The girl- 'He hummed for a little while at first, then began a talk and talk and talk.' 'I just want to hear increasingly about her stories, progressively and more, it so different than the way I was raised, and my children were raised,' I said- to Kristen.

'I feel the Dr-rip, Dr-rip, of my coffee going down my chin, onto my shirt.'

'SHIT...!' I think looking at him, as- the girl.

'What wrong-' Shanna said, looking all concerned about everything?'

‘Just what a man wants, freaking hot coffee going down his crotch,’ said, Shanna- she was rolling her eyes, running past with hot pigs in a blanket.’

‘It is time to go home’-, my nurse, said impatiently? ‘Not- a yet’ I said, loudly and everyone looked at me- as if I was too old and cranky, I do not know why, yet that’s life, also.’

~*~

Midnight-sh

Lyncie- ‘He started to run the numbers in his head of the cheek, as you could gather it is lunchtime, then stopped to think and slapped his money down.’ ‘He knew what it was going to be before their person at the cash register, ‘like how you do that?’ He spoke. ‘It’s- a something I picked up, back in the day, I-a, only have-a third-grade education- yet what does that say to you?’ I thought.

‘WOW!’ Said the cashier. (Shocked looking face...)

John- ‘I remember my first job oh so- o why back when.

I was your age you have it a lot better than I. Don’t you mean- me? They said with one eyebrow up.’

‘Kids today I think to myself, I knew all that way back-a, when- yet that is okay you learn what-a, you want to learn when you want to learn it. That was the way it was in my life too.’

‘You make me feel dumb, that is not- the point’- I said, ‘you have lots to learn... yet- missy, life will teach you that.’ He pushed my hand into his saying- ‘You’ll do fine, look at me I did.’

‘Yet it is never- ever an enough is it’ I asked? ‘It can be, you have to find that one out on your own.’ he said recklessly rushing to the door, being called.’

‘Life is like a leave dying slowly on the trees- like all the maple leaf blowing in the breeze swirling around in the air and landing at my feet- with the street lights beginning to flicker on in a warm glow, you’re never really going where you want to, no matter how long it’s going to be before it is covered over or parts of it lost in the ground at your feet forever- like us- just dust in the wind, or like a headstone- with carved names and dates I can’t read, that is all they remember you, me, us- them too far, this is what that gray thing will say, nothing I could or want to recite and that is little to nothing- also.’

‘The thoughts of joy leave me in that cold thought- of what is to come- passing, expiry, and death. In a way, I decided to enjoy the rest of my days and months of life, not thinking about the last breath that I will soon be taking, yet it pops up now and then, yet is that a good thing? Um- at this point in my life I am not sure about anything, but the end of it.’

‘Without worrying- I look away out the window, seeing that I am being gestured too, it would work out for her too, he knew it in his mind almost feeling bad for her; it always did for him, he thought, yet it was not easy, it was extremely hard, like the love you got to make it work, he also thought rushing for home.’

‘Besides, thinking about money usually bored me it’s not about the money that makes you happy, he thought to move his feet two doors down, it’s what others can do for you with that money- he knew all too well in that thought.’

Lesia- ‘Early on, John learned to enjoy all the simple things that he loves at the café, like all the people, all his friends, and even family- things that could not be bought, and he had a challenging time understanding people who felt any different.’ ‘It was a little after five when he quit talking, and he settled back into his lazy boy chair and began to rock.’

‘By happenstance, he looked upward and saw some leftovers in a go box from over at the café and said- ‘I take it, over to the counter, to make room to start working on a puzzle, stars, spark-a-ling outside in the autumn sky.’

‘‘Funny how a melody sounds like a memory.’ Like rock music of the past.’ ‘He felt good and clean now, fresh- cleaning up for bed. His muscles were tired, and he knew he would be a little sore tomorrow, but he was pleased that he had accomplished most of what he had wanted to do.’

(Weeks's past and I am there seeing.)

Zoey- ‘John is a calm man, no pets at this point in his life, he’ll come up to them I have two on a leash like me he was to nuzzle up to them and will talk about anything really- just a nice guy, that gets me.’

‘He talks with his hands a lot, and talk broken sometimes, to the point that I don’t understand it, yet I get it.’

‘Hey, girlie, how’re you doing today?’ He said this to me. he asked as he grabbed at my apron- I started working here, and she

cackled aloud and said- 'I'm doing,' her soft round eyes peering upward at him who is much taller. She does not work nights like these always, yet I know some girls that do- like me after school.'

(The next day)

I- Zoey made him think of my wife- 'He was twenty- one, not too old not too young just right- oh I remember him saying think back 2 years back or so, but old enough to be all alone- with him- it was my consent there was nothing wrong with it... I thought- and mom and dad well did not care- about me regardless, and what I did- or with- I can say I was, and still am mixed up.'

'He hadn't dated since in my mind at all I have not been back here- since yah know- the end, I hadn't met anyone who remotely interested me- I was a lot like him too when he was my age.'

'It was his responsibility, he knew that I could see that, so could I.' She spoke.

Zoey- 'There was something that held in standby at distance between him and me, yet I want to know more, and any woman who started to get close doesn't want to pull away, even if not sure about doing crazy things that don't make any sense to the man or the ones that see her day in and day out, something he wasn't sure he could change; about himself- just dumb- I thought, yet I like that about him, and yet so smart- even if he tried not to be- with me to be friendly- I was like his girl.' 'Also, sometimes in the moments when right before, like- I fell asleep it's like I can see all along it was right- wondering all for nothing- he was going to be mine forever- I thought and, in a way, still is.'

'Like it was all meant to be- yet 'that's life' or so he always said.' John- I fear to feel my heartbreak a second time because I am not sure I could survive it- just talking about him- I loved this man.'

'I would rather live alone than risk the pain of not having what it is I need that he gave me, I know that he is not with me any longer he was sitting next to her in the very spot 2 years back, and the last thing she said was- 'I love you on the bottom of a Polaroid and she falls forward a chair, breaking down into tears.'

'I have been on my senses, like him who said he was since the 1980's- yet 'that's life.'"

(Wahoo! With a holding in letting go- deep breathing.)

‘Broken hearts heal... she said and there is a little-cracked smile still, the wounds are always there, yet fade in time. she said in her young wisdom- like a lady. Like spitting cuts, like bloody knives healed within the heart.’ She spoke.

‘People lived and worked, get sick and die, we laughed and ate, and I cried- and that was about it. Like he did with his wife, in a way I took the place of the pain he felt I made him feel young, and me worth living on in this life.’

‘For there were many scars we both share about our lives, I am returned to my old ways, yet I never really loved, even if I just played around- it not the same with me.’ ‘Sometimes, you wind comes up, blown off your course, hell- I know, I was and so was he, we had so much in common. You are not ready for it- I remember that too, but if you are lucky, you end up in a more interesting place than you’d-a scheduled. ‘I recollect him saying that too did not get it at the time I do now.’

‘You devote your life getting walked on, you learn to identify the footstep.’ He said that to me- I wrote it down.

(Back)

Kristen- ‘He smiled to himself. For some reason, and said that one above, a day before his passing.’ ‘He knew a lot of people yet maybe more in his mind than he lets on.’

‘Most of his youth, it was not surprising, yet not astonishing... Like so many towns, the people who lived here never changed, it is all just talk of a small town... minds- never change when minds are made up-and that it, this story is false, and believe in it also as some schoolchildren’ fantasies, tells of a simpleminded girl growing a bit older, and a little faded- as she sees too- like that pink dress she is always in.’

(Memorizing)

She said I evoke- ‘He gave me a quick, casual kiss on the cheek first. Then came the hugs, and it was the hugs that was it for me, it was the first one I had in my life.’

They said- ‘she wasn’t exactly sure when it happened, yet she remembers all the events clearly.’

‘Or even when it started.’ The other server said.

‘All she knew for sure was that right here and now- made up at the time, she was falling hard for a life’s story, she was making up...’ They spoke.

‘I was feeling the same way about her loving it.’ She said, he said.

‘I feel myself having or wanting to go to the restroom, yet I don’t want to move.’ She said, ‘I might not be able to hold the pee in.’

11

‘Maybe... all of this is not what I wanted to be remembered for, and maybe it is?’ It was said.

‘The evening passed, one after another after another, and yet once more, staying warm is hard to do around here, hard not to get cold.’ She spoke.

‘I listened to the crickets and the whizzing leaves, I hear the crash of footsteps of in the distances, seeing the amber post lamps flicker on- as I did with him 2 years ago, the sun has closed it the tired eye for the day,’ I remember him saying that too.

He said to me- ‘Explaining that the sound of nature was more genuine and stimulated more emotion than things like cars going past, look at how the cars have changed, what happens to them.’

‘Look at all the natural things giving back to us, yet all we do is take away from it.’ He said that... I have it here add to the scrapbook, he kept for all those years- and now it is mine to add to and keep- is it not? Even if they do not believe me, it is all here.

He said- ‘There were times during the war, turn- turn and turn- there is a session too- especially after a major date of destruction when he had often thought about these simple sounds- he would never hear again.’

‘It’ll keep you from going nuts-o.’ That is what I said, at once...

‘After sitting down again, he looked at the book, saying if I go take this and keep it always and ever. It was old, the cover was torn, and the pages were stained.’

‘To reflect on the past, that is why I have to say that too.’
‘Bottomless in her heart, she wasn’t sure she earned to be blissful, nor

did she believe, that she was or well-intentioned to be once more to someone who seemed not to get her it would be, so unusual.'

I remember when- 'John finished his coffee, went back out on the porch, and to hear all the sounds, found the book on the table, then he turned on the porch light on his way, back in to grab something else, like his jacket- I have it on now.'

I think of him saying- 'It is getting cold,' he said to himself- there was nothing but eeriness. I rubbed the cover, and saw some of the old, crumpled photos fall to the ground, must leave all around them as he talked about so much around this time 2 years back, see them I cannot get them... all would you help me here?' 'They're going to get wet...' She spoke.

'Yet, I find myself doing just that bending down- dusting them off just a little, and shoving them back in- I feel on edge, and want to be inside, and not scared- yet I am. I do not have a place to go but the bench outside the café- to stay tonight.'

I remember him losing his recollections on what was in the book- 'Then he let the book open randomly when he got up the next day and sat and looked through the photos feeling that they were all new in front of him, yet it was less than 6 hours ago he saw them.'

'Once and only once, and a long time ago.' He said I remember seeing these...

'The place, the year, the date, showing him and his kids and wife- Then at that moment everything had changed for him forever- after the moment was gone after taking the still frame, he read on the back of the photo their names; I can read some... it does not like I can- not- a.'

'Have you been in love more once, I- Zoey asked the question to him? Yet I did not seem to get it... when he said there was only one... Hum...?' I spoke.

'YOU!' He said, grabbing my little hand. 'In the end, folks should be judged by their actions, meanwhile, in the end, it was activities that define us all.' He said that- I wrote it all down here, for you to have- she said to- Marcel, who believed her stories- and he said- back to her- 'I will add this all in if you feel just.'

It was asked- what is- a "Perfect love- is there much of a thing?" I do not know at this point- she said to me, nevertheless- I think I have felt that... with this person, and this had been perfect.'

‘Clouds overhead rain on my mind it slowly began to roll across my thoughts like the evening sky on a storm-ie day in the autumn, turning thoughts silvery- and blocking out everything with the reflection of my aging self- as it blows over.’

I stay in this apartment when they let me- thoughts and more feelings ‘As they set my emotional states are rainy- like the days here, I leaned backward in his rocking chair, and I think it’s going to flip on me.’

‘My legs moved automatically to stop it, keeping a steady rhythm, and as he did most evenings, I remember, he felt his mind drifting back to a warm evening like this fourteen years ago. I was only 2 at the time- so-o... I would not remember.’

‘The town is not what you would call full, it’s seen better days, yet a good day could be coming, yet I will not see them- I don’t want to live... here.’

He said here in this one- ‘I enjoy the game of life it’s-a, all by chance, or is it?’

Living with the why- ‘That is a question that has no answer- or maybe its doses.’

‘It was a damp night to speak of all this and raining on me too- for some reason I remembered, that a day later- that maybe my life is not over its just beginning a new chapter.’ Zoey thought.

I reminiscence back to when- ‘He arrived alone at the cafe, and he strolled through the crowd, looking for just one friend, he saw me, he’d grown attached to, talking to this girl, he’d never seen before or maybe he did- it was me.’

‘She was pretty, smart, and fun... she remembered thinking, and when she finally joined him, she looked his way with a pair of misty bark eyes.’ ‘Hi,’ she’d said shyly as she was taken by his charm and by his touch outwards to her hand, sweet man she thought.’

‘As a girl, she had come to believe in the ideal man or, so she said to me as I write the parts for the book, the prince or knight of her childhood stories like a fairytale-like Rapunzel. As a writer, I went with it.’

‘In the real world, however, men like that simply did not exist’- she elaborated, ‘or maybe they do?’

She all said wrinkling up her nose, along with saying-

‘If you can find them, then at all.’

‘The girl is sweet- and what I would call adorable, what I would have gone for back in my day, also... I thought when doing the interview.’

(‘The ordinary beginning of a young life, I thought, something that would have been forgotten to me for I felt like her at that age.’)

I could have never been anyone but her- his wife that is- she said in a moment of shame, I reminded him of her, and that why he loves me- not for me, for a memory, I used him.’

(I just looked at her dumbfounded, I nodded and smiled.) She said, ‘He took her hand and kiss it so I knew it was not her- he knows what he was doing- she said, when he met those striking brown eyes- with mine, he knew before he’d taken him next to his last breath, when I was there holding his hand that I was not her, I was the one he could spend the rest of his life looking for but never find again.’

He said to me- ‘She seemed that good, that faultless, while a summer wind blew through the trees, as she and I walked around and to his home always being nice. From there, it went like a tornado wind in my mind coming and going, that I was falling like the leaves blowing around us.’

They said- ‘Every morning but Sunday when he had to go to church this girl sits next to him- it was an old relationship, where she’d been waiting for him to just say hello, she is too lonely for at fourteen girl- too clingy, and far too voluptuous for her good.’

‘Because she was a newcomer and had not spent time in a small town before, new to a new school and not treated right- they spent their days doing things that were completely new to her and him just as friendship should be, that was like father-daughter.’ Said another woman- speaking up defending her- finally.

‘This is just what John need in his life at this point, a new spark to keep him going, she said also, she would take him to places and do all kinds of things like reading him books or long novels, so he can finally know all the things in books that he’d had always wanted to know.’

‘They walked together and watched summer thunderstorms, loved the springtime, by the fences- the strolled and sat it was not that far away for him, yet was it’s all ending though, it

seemed as though they'd always known each other- ways and thoughts too, even when the school days started for her, her mind was on him.'

'They met up every day, and the day after that too, and they soon became inseparable to time- and age.'

'He taught her how to explore all that is around and above, not even going that far, in the town either. It was a love that did not love- I do not know what to call it- yet, other than love... To people regardless of age and time.' She added.

'Change isn't always for the best, though sometimes it is needed or has to happen, and you can't do anything about it,' Zoey said.

He said- 'But I learned things as well as she, in this town like a dance that never ends, never doing what it is you want to do- yet feel the need to do more and more.'

'She wanted to learn how to do the waltz dance, so he taught her to do just that out on the sidewalk- believing she would never go to the dances, with a boy her age- she held that thought at the time.' 'Did they stumble through the first few songs young and old it just doesn't work or does it?' Others looked- others talked to them, they were in their little world.

'He walked her home afterward, and when they paused on the porch after saying goodnight, he kissed her for the first time and wondered why he had waited as long as he had.' She thought back to the vivid moment.

'He did realize it was not his first love.' He knew she said- them and there.

'To him it was her... the same thing happens in the old country all the time he thought- it is all repeating to me, yet all-new for her- the sweet girl- that I am falling for.'

'She was taken back by falling to his ways of never finding, that in a younger boy.'

12

'They met the following day, and the day after that, and they soon became joined at the hip.'

‘They learned things together and felt awesome about it, he felt as if he was with his love, it was so wrong, for her- and even more for him, yet was so right all at the same time.’

‘I was as if it was a fall romance, just like being in the vineyards of Italy, walking down the winding pathways, lights in a yellow glow, it’s all the same to him, yet oh so new to her, yet as she said she felt as Gaetanina did- thinking back on how the most of looked at her.’

‘Sometimes, that name slips out and he calls me that- yet that’s okay.’ I had to say that at the time to keep going a little crazy.

‘I don’t care, I did care about him, I would play her to feel the love I need- to feel even if wrong.’ She said tearing up.

‘A true twist to an unbelievable start- of romance that was everything to them.’

‘Like hands going down her sides softly- like a voice caressing her ears with a sigh, a soft kiss on her lips and moving ever so slowly downward, feeling all the tingles within her lips and hips.’

‘I am not an overly sensual girl, up till now anyway- this makes me feel oh so good about myself, and I knew it wrong- I know it’s oh so-o wrong.’

She said to me- ‘I do not care, she wants all the town to know- even her dad did not get it- ‘I love him, daddy she said to him too- when he thought her out.’

‘On the other hand, he is not for you- he is too old.’ He said angrily.

She was dreaming- ‘I love the wetness of the water on the beach- I love the sand I feel in-between my toes, I love the feeling of sunbathing, on a golden day, yet I want to see you with me.’

‘That is where I would love to be...’ This did not stop them- from planning regardless of what they all said, just another fun day at play she thought, like warm sand on the bay, and having crashing waves, as the music would play for them to dance, it was love. He made her feel as if this would happen, yet he knew better- it was just talk- to make her feel loved.’

She said, ‘I-a, oh, it’s-a, not going to happen- I have lived all my days,’ he said to her. She was saddened by this for she had her

whole life now planned, it was only him she saw in her eyes of life. Yet it could not be.'

He said, and she felt that 'Age it is just a number she said to- John- and about him to me. 'Yes, but God can give or take,' 'I am not going to last forever yet they went on.' He said to her.

'Love is like the wives on the sand, you can't see them crash, and you can feel it moving through you.' She spoke.

John- 'Lacking grief, there'd be no empathy.' He said, "for me or us now would there?"

'I don't get it...?' She said then at that moment.

'You will when I am gone-' he said. 'I don't want you to be.' Zoey said back- 'With pain and weakness in her young little sweet voices.'

'I held her close to me with my eyes sealed, deliberating if something in my lifespan, had ever been this faultless and knowing at the same time, that it hadn't ever been so divine.' That is what he did.

'I was in love, and the feelings that I had are what I need to feel the most, could it be any more wonderful, wishing the day would never- ever end, more than I ever imagined it could be if they didn't?'

'That is the question that must know the answer to as of now. The end- that is...'

'But she learned things as well, and she was learning from him- with his wisdom, that he was passing down to her.'

She conjured the thoughts back in her mind about how-

'We would eat at the café day in, and day out, and then go to something like a dance or something like that on the weekends- he never thought he could be I made him feel young and he did it for me, it is everything, I ever want a boy- MAN to do with me, even go to the pool and see me dive.

It is not in a creepy way- said the girl, it was just a friendship at this point, or was it, said another speaking up, over top her. I was the one that wanted him there, for he was my only friend in this town- even now you mean girls cannot stand that can you?'

‘Some night we just stumbled through the leaves seeing all that is to see, the town is lovely, yet some of the people as you can see and hear are not, yet as he would say- ‘that’s- a life.’” She spoke.

‘I never wanted anything more than to say that you were mine, now and forever.’ She spoke.

‘I want to say- that we did more than just sleep together- I want to say that. When we needed someone to be there, you were more than a friend to me- I wanted to say that too and I just did.’

I said this to him- ‘You are someone that I understand, someone that sees me for whom I am, I never had that with anyone else. ‘I think- I love you!’”

‘Hey, I am not saying the love wasn’t good, but this is not right you need to leave, me before it comes to trouble with me, and you, and them too- you see- do you see, this cannot-a be- it just cannot-a.’ He spoke.

‘What is this like the 10th time we did it, and I bent you over.’ I love it and remember the O’s.

‘I love the scars on my back that you made, I love when you ride me like you do ‘la-la-love me as you do, touch me as you do, what are you waiting for.’”

‘I love the sound you make, as you sigh... you are the best thing that ever happened to me.’ He said she felt the same.

‘But is it going to be me or him? ...Forever and always, is it?’

‘If you want me you need to stop letting him, put his d*ck in you, he knew that I was seeing another boy.’ Yet it was the time I thought that I would see what could be with another... I do not know what I want.’

‘Oh, and like you have not been with others than me,’ she said.

‘I do not want to have to lick up what was his leftovers.

Why, is it wrong for me, you have had other lovers have you not?’ She said, sticking up for her rights to do with her body as she felt just.

‘I have only sucked one other boy than you, it’s not like I have been with all that many guys.’

‘But I only wanted you to be with me.’ He said, and she said back- ‘yet it not going to last forever now, is it?’

‘Yeah, well it doesn’t work that way... a girl has to shop around for what she wants.’ She said to me, in her interview, of me adding to the story.

‘To they finally go with some like you.’ She said that next- winking at me, all flirty.

She asked- ‘Then why do you even like me... is it only for the sex or what?’ I said now I have gotten to know you, that is why, and I do not judge- for being human- you live and learn, I said.

‘No, I love your eyes’- she said to me, I love your hair, I love the taste of you- and I did not know I was starving ‘till I tasted you, I love your small- I love you, for more than just the sex. What do you say, little boy- you and I being together?’

‘Yeah right, I know what you want!’ I said back,

‘I see you too.’

‘But more than anything else... I love your heart.’ I spoke.

She said to me- ‘a big heart- I love the way it sounds as I lay my head on your chest during a movie; the rhythm becoming irregular- when I am next to you.’

‘I do not want to be with you just for fooling around. It is much more than that! I want you; I love who you are...’ She said to me.

‘So, what am I to you?’ I asked, ‘Why do you want me over any other girl?’ ‘Hum... if you have to ask then you never really know... and if you know then you need not ask.’ I spoke.

~*~

...Speaking, imprisoned:

‘We are entombed, trapped like rats in a trap!’

‘Everywhere I go I have no privacy, I have no satisfaction over dating him, I can’t get it... it’s not something I can have.’

‘My phone is hacked, and my PC hacked too.’

‘I am being watched right now; I am- over him.’

‘They know everything I do, everywhere I go- as they do with him.’

‘They see who I am friends with and end it just because they can- just like with him.’

‘Yet we have each other and that all of them matter more than their reputations.’

‘They because of us, sit me up just to fall into their trap. I have used the fake name, it is all the same, I am there a toy in their sick twisted game.’

‘At what a point do you say- I’ve had enough?’ Stop it- ‘get a life!’

‘Friend comes and goes; I know that nothing can last more than a week with me; it has been like this all my life.’ She said, and I said too.

‘You just get attached, and they put an end to it so fast... you would not believe me- nobody does.’

‘Why- I do not know it because they must have me for their own- tormentor or something, and they can’t see me having a love of another that is not what they say I should have?’

‘I don’t know... all I know is that everyone leaves me before, I want them too.’

‘But like I have a choice. No, not really. If you want me, we need to...’

‘Run... and never look back, we go far from here where it won’t matter, will be gone so far away, that the names they say, won’t mean a thing because, we will have each other, and not care what others say.’

‘Are happiness would lie in each- other’s arms, and the rings on your finger.’

‘I do not want to trap you, but you need to say- yes to me, so this can happen! The sooner the better!’

‘You’re caught by an overprotective and malicious ex-girlfriend, who now hates you.’ She said... ‘and them too and their talk.’

‘Who makes you work like a fool...?’

The ex-said- ‘The jerk will not even buy you a ring after so many years of dating.

‘Yet she trapped you!’

‘You think he loves you?’ She asked, saying- it as if he was still hers or something. Or is she just trapping you until she finds something more to settle too?’ The ex-said.

‘You are longing for your town. You are craving because you like me but cannot.’ He spoke. ‘You are trapped because of what they all say about me and you. All that matters to me is what you think and can think for yourself- as you do.’

‘You’re longing for them, and they make sure, that you’re not even allowed to look at another man like me.’

‘Plus, it all goes back to the mean girls in this town, the ones that trapped us both in not being in love- yet not allowed to love it’s forbidden to me- you- and us.’

‘Forbidden to date, see, look, feel, or even talk to one another- or it could end in jail time- yet ‘A-Okay’ for any other.’

‘Longing into missing out, longing into being the weirdo.’

She said, ‘an outcast...’

‘Longing into not knowing what you would feel like, in a hug or kisses too.’

‘Longing into being hated for no reason by others by their rumors.’

‘Longing into missing you.’ He thought.

‘You are stuck into wishing for me and dreaming of what could be. Yet your friends love them and not me, with me all they see in the past that is not true, the past that I was trapped in.’

‘I am stuck with you in so many ways, that you never even knew about.’

‘Ensnared because, I have fallen in love with you, and can’t seem to forget about you.’

‘You’re on my mind all the time.’

‘No blocks can stop us from someday getting together.’

‘That is only if you get out of the trap of allowing everyone to push you around.’

‘You have to be strong and fight.’

‘I am ensnared into fighting for your hand, and your love, and I just don’t know why I keep deceiving myself to you.’

‘I just don’t understand why- I can’t get you out of my mind.’

‘I know one thing, I never ensnared you like everyone seems to do around here, I am not like that.’

‘If you want me fine, and if not fine. I am involuntary forced into being a hopeless romantic...’

‘I have to get out.’

‘I don’t care what my mind says is logical, what my heart says it needs!’

‘There’s been rumored of an uprising free of all the restrictions of the world within me.’

‘I’m done caring about the consequences; it’s time to be selfish and do something for me.’

‘The longing of you I can’t take it anymore.’

‘The passion- I have for you has my skin on fire! I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, and I can function right. Without you being in my life.’

‘It seems like you and I are trapped into having chastity belts, with no way to unlock them and connect.’

‘You have the key, and you’re mine.’

‘I am confined in the fantasy of us sleeping together playing in my head.’

‘Captivated into wanting more than one-night stands with you. Like that even possible.’

‘You’re enslaved into making them happy, while on the inside you’re miserable.’

‘Stuck!’

‘I am without you next to me now.’

‘I want to feel your kiss; I want to feel your body spooning or unstop of mine.’ ‘I want to go out with you, and not have everyone stop it.’

‘I want to go everywhere with you.’

‘I want you to live with me, you have a home here if you can get out of your trap- and so can I.

‘I want you to share my bedroom... I know it is crazy- I want to go crazy with you!’

‘But- I want you to be my girl.’

‘You have spellbound me in the spell of your dark eyes, and shy little sensual ways.’

‘Instead of losing my mind to you, I was hoping it would have been something else. She said, what if that was all just stories- what if... what if he was just a friend- in the end, and you are all that mattered?’

‘I don’t care when as long as it’s soon, I don’t care how as long as it happens, I don’t care who sees us, it could be in a car in a local store parking lot.’

(In the woods, of sneaking around.)

‘It’s all the same to me along as I am with you!’ ‘Do me this favor and take it from me. I do not want to be thirty when I get married either, I want it now as I want you now.’

She said...

‘As long as you are the one, I want you to be the first in everything, you should not feel caught up by him to feel love like that. I am not sure if I will be your first, but I want to be the last.’

‘You should be feeling the love from me.’

‘The love I can give and take with you. It is love; I have for you... not entrapment.’

‘Really, I don’t think- I am being selfish it is just time- for this, all this all happens to me.’ She said...

‘I have waited for far too long now!’

‘Self-seeking I just need you, to save me!’

She is- ‘Bounded into taking care of everyone else, while nobody takes care of her.’ She spoke.

‘Fixed into a setting at home and going out to get away.’ She feels.

‘Wedged into using others money, because they won’t let her work in her hometown, I have everything I need, but not what I want.’ She spoke.

‘Caught into doing work, and not getting paid. Trapped for life, and afraid!’ She whispered.

‘Jammed into my faith, yet to me, that is a good thing.’

‘Hopeful that there is a life after death if not then life is not worth living is it.’ She alleged.

‘Surrounded by them into fear of death, trapped into seeing death all around me.’ She whispered.

‘Chosen into being around life, that just doesn’t get it.’ More of her thoughts were spoken.

‘Trapped into feeling cold.’

‘Entombed into being warm to those that are cold.’

‘Permanent into seeing the small light, in the never-ending darkness. ‘Squeezed into never- ever giving up.’

~*~

(Longing and Desire)

‘I am longing to see you.’

‘Longing to be with you, longing to hear from you.’

‘I am longing for you.’

‘A longing like desire, I am desiring what I am longing for, and desiring is what trapping me to you right now.’ ‘Longing and desire, that I have for you are pushing you away from them, and- also me.’

‘Like a dark storm over your head. You have longed for me, but can it be, but will you and I be more than longing and desire?’

‘Will we always be trapped in too long and desire, by the ones that long and desire to keep us apart?’

‘I am longing and desiring your kiss on my lips!’

‘I am longing for your desired hug with my hand right above your hips.’

‘Letting go of the past, with its dark toxic memories seeing them slip and rip from our grip and fade away, for a brighter happier day, all I can do is pray for the both of us. You and I, being together is necessary!’

13

‘Do you love me,’ he asked then she was like it was not something they could say- more what I feel- you understand.’

‘She smiled, he nodded.’

‘Yes, in a peculiar way...’

‘I am getting too old for this- he said.

Do I make you happy?’ He spoke.

‘As I asked her this, I felt my heart beginning to race, for him yet I don’t know if it was racing back for me or the other girl oh so long ago.’ She thought.

‘Yet, I did not care- and I don’t get why at all- with what I do.’

‘Of course, I do you, I am a girl- she said, yet not this one...’

‘I knew what she meant by that?’

‘You’ll see when I am gone.’ I wonder what she meant by that one...

(A week passed, and she killed herself over bullying in her small hometown.)

‘I don’t want you to be ever- ever the blame.’

‘Well- it doesn’t work that way,’ I said not understanding.

‘She looked away, sadness crossing the features of her face, hoping that day would never- ever come- that we would not be allowed to be together- yet it happened.’

‘I do not know if I can anymore.’ she said.’

‘I don’t know if we should be doing this- he said her name, I feel hand-me-down, but don’t want to give up-on you.’

(I should not have said that looking back.)

‘Why don’t you want me for me? She said- ‘it’s me and this town was dragging us down.’

‘‘Yes,’ she finally said, her voice weak yet somehow still full of capacity.’

‘I would do this...’

‘Lastly getting control of myself I kissed her again, then brought her hand to her face, and moderately running my fingers over her cheek and through her long brown hair.’

‘Looking into those sparkly brown eyes, that glitter in the moonlight.’

‘She marveled at the softness of her skin and how she closed her eyes, he was her age- and his mind if anything, the tenderness was within her eyes, yet was it all there... or was she fading away then?’

‘Even now she was perfect, and he was too, for her, it was just the age- and the town saying not so-o. My throat began to tighten long for it, but as I said, I knew what I had to do.’

‘It was that moment that time, it was all right, the sense I had to accept, that it was not within my power to cure him of the phase in my mind it was not there, what I wanted to do was give him

something that he wanted, and never got, as a girl, he was looking at me do things differently- then other girls in this town- I knew.'

'I can adequately accept it and describe the intensity of what I was feeling- at that instant.' 'Love, ire, wretchedness, faith, and horror whirling together sharpened by the tension- I was feeling. Yet it was all good to release it all.'

'I Zoey looked at myself curiously and my breaths became shallower. He calls me out by my name, and it was everything to me.'

'Suddenly, I knew that I'd never felt as strongly for another person as I did at that moment- not- even before.'

'As I reimbursed her stare, this simple understand and made me desire for more, the time, that I could make all this go away, and have more of this- is it even possible or likely?'

'I would have traded my life, for his or like give up some of my days just to have the same amount of day together- over.' She said that then it all here in the scrapbook.

'I wanted to tell her my thoughts, about that sweetness she had, but stop- no I would not have- yet I hold back on it, and let it all go, for me and her- should I have said my thoughts that, I would never say now?'

'I kissed her hand it's just, what I do, but the sound of her voice suddenly silenced the emotions inside me, to come out with it- and it was the- I love you, she was yearning to hear.'

'Encouraged, I leaned closer and took a deep breath, and left it all out. When I breathe out softly, these were the words that poured out so-o- with my breath.'

'Will you marry me?'

'He asks- it was like it was before- yet in a new way why she wanted this.' 'She said- 'Maybe...?'...And left it at that, she was grinning from ear to ear, next to him, they stayed.'

'I smiled softly, and she returned my regard with a slight cuddle of my hand as if unquestioning me in what I was about to do.'

'It was what my heart had been telling me to do all along, it was all right- she thought- yet demons were playing in her logic.'

~*~

(Thought)

‘I assumed then, already set in the answer, I’d been searching for, is here with me now- the answer my heart needed to find, is right here, the night I asked him about doing the playful things, that boyfriend- girlfriends do, my age- and we did- yet my mind was made up of them- and what they say.’

14

‘She makes me feel amazing, she more than just a little girl to me- I-a, don’t have many words for her- just my sweetheart.’ That is what I said here... ‘He walked her home afterward, and when they paused on the porch after saying goodnight, he kissed her with more lust, of what she wanted and wondered why he had waited as long as he had to do it that way- for her to understand this was real.’

~*~

‘That is when I found her- irresistible.’

~*~

(The Girl 2)

Zoey- ‘I am now 17 years old I have changed a lot from when I was 15, I have brown eyes and brown hair, I am five nothing, and I am a bit confusing to everyone. I am in love with a girl! The most beautiful girl in the world! Her name is Zoey Shay, she is everything I want!’

‘Yes, I admit it I am in love with her! I have a crush on her for as long as I could remember, yet I never said anything to her, I did not want her to be freaked out by me feeling that way about her, yet I cannot hold back any longer- about a girl named Anna- I kissed her lips and ask her out, way too fast I know, but will she say- yes, if she would she be into me- to go all the way- and deep.’

‘Would they be okay with dating a girl? Why would they not that my only option at this point- is it not.’

‘No, they could not let this be either.’

Even so, she kept pressing on- with her new crush- regardless of what they said. ‘I never- ever thought I would be this way, I never- ever thought about going all the way with a girl, nevertheless, I feel the need to make it clear to everyone that she is what I want.’

‘You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because the reality of them there is finally better than your dreams.’ ‘I have sex dreams about her every night! With her fingering me.’

‘And kissing my nipples, and licking me down there, yet the dreams are amazing! I want the real thing and I am going to get it too; I would go crazy if I did not.’

‘Have you ever been in love with a girl?’

‘I could taste that wet in the pink tunnel of heaven in my mind! Mm-Hum: I could feel that the middle finger of her going deep inside of me as mine does. It is like it was not a dream, at all.’

‘So, I walked up to her in the hallway today and I asked her out, and to my surprise, she said yes, yes- ‘I would love to go on a date with you.’ ‘You’re so sweet, why wouldn’t I want to.’ She said, and she said too.’

‘I never thought about being in a gay relationship, but I will try anything once. I find girls attentive, what is not to like; just look at you.’ She said, and she felt that way too.

‘You have it all, smooth skin, nice boobs, and an adorable laugh.’ All good things she thought too.

‘I could see us being more than just friends, and that is when it happens, she French kissed me in front of everyone in the hall, it was like fireworks went off, everyone was cheering for on.’

(Little did I know that it was all- just them making fun of me.)

‘She had her hands on my butt as I had mine on her chest.’

‘The first kiss was... perfect!’

She said: ‘So, honey now take me into your loving arms.’

‘Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars tonight.’

‘I’ll say I’ll kiss you in the rain, so you get twice as wet.’

‘I can’t wait to play with you under your underwear- at your locker.’

‘I want to lose myself between your legs, in my bed, in your bed, outside I don’t care- everywhere.’

‘I want to watch as you lick your fingers after you have gone down on me, and you have been down inside me.’

‘Let us freak and cuddle, and pound our little ladies together do it, repeatedly, sharing the realistic one that we need to have this happen- she then I- then she and over.’

‘I want to hear you say you want to taste me!’

‘I want to make it with you in public, and in my room too.’

She said to me- and they did, for them all to see, and make fun of.

‘I have sex with you a lot in my mind... does that freak you out.’ Anna said to her.

‘Nope not at all, Zoey said sheepishly.’

‘It turns me on!’ Anna said, ‘that your so naïve it sweet she said tapping her on the nose.’ ‘Face down ass up, or legs up in the air... I would ‘I want her to spank me, I want to be her naughty girl.’ She said to her in a way that was older than her years.

‘I want to eat it out and never stop!’ Said Anna.

‘In a way rubbing one out is a form of stress relief, it calmed me doing it study hall class thinking about her, I was going to sit behind her- and let her know I was even, so I was looking forward to that- moment all day, I don’t think I can hide this smile on my face- it was time, all the other girls know- too they can see me- what I just did- it was obvious.’

‘My clitoris is still so-o sanative, as I ask to go to the bathroom, from the lunchroom where they have study hall- to clean up some. Even my teacher knew that I was just doing it, and he was smiling at me too.’

‘Zoey, Zoey, Zoey!’ She said breaking the quiet rule, ‘I’d love yes either way.’

Anna- yelled and her girlfriends giggled.

Read this simplemindedness, Anna said- ‘I want her to come in my mouth, over and over and over. I want her to kiss me all over and suck me down and play with it.’ Said Zoey in a note that would last the test of time.

She also said the following- 'Please rip off my clothes now and let us do it here in school, and that is what we did we went into the girl's bathroom and had girl sex for the first time.' Said Anna, it was all part of the plan for us girls that could not stand her, she needs to- 'gotten rid of'- she said.

'It was the best pleasure- that I have ever had in my life.' Said Zoey- here in her little sweet book that knows gives a care about, and Anna throws it- a- crossed the room.

She even said that she 'loved fingering freaking me in a public place, with all the girls walking in to see us doing it.' Awe- no? she said with a mean streak.

'It's the hornet truth she has it all in there about us, I have ever been with her like this- that my story and prove that it's not, she felt the same way- about every girl with an ass- or and a boy who squirted all over her face.'

Zoey said to Anna, 'I would do whatever you tell me to do.'

'I want you to kill yourself!' Said Anna...

(And that night she did- with a boy drowning in the

Hastings pool, at night- her pastime place is where she was happy to end her life.)

Anna- I remember her saying to me- 'Hey- do you want to go with me to the movies this Friday coming up?' I said yes, I can say I did not learn to like the girl.

'We do not have to look at the movie we can make out, it is dark in there. I would love to- I said with excitement.' I- Anna remember it all.

There they both are- 'At the movie, the lights went dark, it was the scary part, I was drawn to the screen, but then she moved her whole body into mine, and she surprised me in a way that you would not believe.'

Zoey- 'I think, I love you!' Said Anna 'I want you to show me how much you love me! (That was the night before...) What do you say will you show me!'" She said like a baby- this one was- like a dumb baby.

I- said this to her- 'Open up to me, and I'll open up for you in so many ways, I will blow your mind!' 'After loving and losing I became gay and found love- with her and I do feel bad...' ...And she snickered out loud- saying- 'yes right,' that all that matters- here she dead- not the love that is a life- see her- end.'

I recall- 'Skirt pushed up and hand and fingers feeling everything she wanted me to feel like it is going to her soul or more.' Said Anna, she believes in a god, and a soul too- cute- shows the simple not?

'She did want to be here anyway- or in school, she was not that bright. I knew more than she ever thought- the town feels the same- you can fix simple-mindedness.' Said Anna.

'We- spent hours together talking about our dreams- I could have cared less to hear them, yet I had a job to do... about the old pervert and then that creepy- creep creeper of a boy, and seeing the world, her wanting to be so- so illustrator-ie- for fun- talking about him- the old man being the chief of damp night spot back in the day, when she lost her virginity to creepo, it was all the same as back in 1940- she said- and I was like are you on drugs, its 2016 girl gets real- all you need to care about is what is underneath your skirt.' Anna- said as an 18-year-old, 'I can't write, I don't know how to-you do it if you think you can,' she was mocking me...

She said about her man- this and her man that- that she would- 'Like a kiss in the rain that you would never- ever forget the first time, and it was a kiss in the rain, long and lasting forever- that say with you forever.' Sardonic she read this, having a tough time doing it also.

She goes one reading like a 5-year-old- 'It wasn't that long the most painful thing about life, it was a perfect feeling of having it, and it certainly wasn't the kind of kiss you see in movies these days, but it was delightful in its way- taking the pain of life away, and all I can evoke about the twinkling stars and in my eyes, is that when our lips touched, I knew the reminiscence would last forever, and be added to the scrapbook but in color- by me to last forevermore, like before in his- and his and in mine, along with her too.'

'Fah and here it is people, laying on the floor...' she runs over to it jumping up and down on it to define it in any way she could- even spitting on the loose pages- like the twisted little pig she was.

'The memories were gone; love gone by one that would never feel love- NEVER- EVER- EVER-NEVER!'

~*~

‘I don’t feel that this is okay to do- It pains me too much anyways- to keep looking, and she loved me more than life.’

(Or did you just want to think that- over the fact, you want to think that, and it made you feel happy?)

‘He got up and walked to the front of the café and looked up at the road- saying I will make my exit now- taking the book with me if you don’t mind.’

‘She was walking after him- saying that belongs to me, insight flashing her fingers, he wouldn’t be stopping, she ran up to meet him, yet she ran with her hitting his arm, almost knocking them over, yet he did not stop.’

‘He pulled a knife and said I will stab your face off! For killing a girl that was more of an asset to this town than you will ever be.’ She backs down, he gets jail time, and she walks away from a free person.

The police officers one his tell now- he walks to her dads’ home- ‘They fall together- the dad falls in the rocker- that was given to them, and it all starts again- all the pain of life.’ He is taken away in handcuffs, and Anna is standing there dumbly looking at me with a misgives smile on her face- if I got away with all of this...

Sitting in the squad car- I look at the pages all tattered parts that are reverbing- ‘Say- I am everything- ‘You’re- everything to me.’

I read- I do not think that we are meant to understand it all the time, I do not want anything bad to happen- and they do they are to blame, I would think that sometimes we just must have faith, and go with it, and hope for the best, yet I do not care, I am on my way to understanding something clearly at last.’

‘What the- HELL...!’

‘I was thinking... SHE KNEW ALL

ALONG SHE WAS GOING TO DIE.’

‘So, that is the ghost you been running from, it like she was looking at me doing this, yet she not there. Everything was all in black and white like the photos of the past.’

‘Haunting feeling of doing the wrong thing for the right wrong came over me, and I was no longer the bad guy.

After getting a mugshot and fingerprinted, and a trip to district judges, I was free to go.

‘I sat on the porch that night I was reading the draft of this story- a story of the past, as people who are no one, can become somebody to someone in this world, photos- of happy times, sad times, lasting- yet them not so-o, listening quietly as he played the music of her childhood, I read- saying this we do-

‘Know warder the kid today is like- so-o messed up,’ he said, ‘maybe something here well snick in.’

‘They’re all being crazy, stupid, in love falling somewhat apart and somewhat together- or trying to forget something or someone.’

‘All trying- to forget, the pain of living in a small town with its charm- that comes with it.’

‘Everywhere he looked, he saw her face and sexy body, saw things that brought her back to life within the pages of a story that would stand the test of time more than some mean girls hate, it was she was standing right there as the wind blow- he felt her- spirit.’

‘It was odd, he knew that- yet he could feel it.’

‘Previously that evening he had sat on the porch a hundred times it never felt that way or so, it seemed to him being apart, he sat alone on the porch swing of her parents’ home, one leg crossed beneath was the leaves blowing- that she loved so-o and showing all that is here once more- all that-a is life- to him and her- like blowing leaves in the autumn.’

‘The branches ensured naked now- and could the swing is slightly moist when he sat down; the rain had fallen previously to that moment, unstable and cruel, but the clouds were dying now and he looked past them, toward the stars coming out above, that was picking through, wondering if he would have made the right choice- by giving this book out to the world, to get it- or not- some time is life too, and look for someone new of his age- would be right also, to move on.’

‘I as the writer would struggle with this for days- and I struggled some more in the evening- thinking about death far too much, but in the end, she knew she would never forgive herself or not be true to her self or me, and even then, if she let the occasion blunder come

her way- she would find a path that seemed right- even if ending too soon- she is now right for some that are going down the wrong pathway- lasting endlessly, in their minds.'

15

I- 'Today, I begin to understand what love must be if it exists... in this dying world, have changed, and got bitter to live.'

'When we are parted, we each felt the lack of love-together not so much- life makes you bitter.' 'We are incomplete like a scrapbook in two volumes- that should have never been published before reading clearly- of which the first has been lost, or ripped apart, or has imagined love to be wrong to most that would look: incomplete with no non-appearance of the truth that is lying within- that gives salvation.'

'10 years- where they go- 10 years, I don't know?'

'It was an easy drive to- Hastings, slightly more than four hours ago, and I arrived a little before noon.'

'I checkered into a small Inn downtown, went to my room in a place not far away- from where it all happened, and undone my bags and got into bed like always, hanging my things in the closet- they give, I look at myself- saying you have changed- in the glass, I needed to do before falling asleep, alone yet, I was with her in my mind- after all this time still, and it felt as if her hand and thoughts, were in his mind still.'

'Putting everything else away for the day, all he wanted was to feel all that- he could not sleep- think about her- and where she might be.'

'The next moment he was lost- in a dream, he had a quick lunch- after waking late, sitting all alone in that same cafe, asked the waitress for directions to the nearest antique store- he wanted to find something his beloved wanted a long time ago, he spent hours shopping and looking for it, yet nothing he got made him happy, it was not for anyone to see- it was for him and her to keep near- it was the typewriter that made the story and him wealthy- that he sold off the published their story to the world- and there it was missing parts- yet all there- for the most part- he was delighted.'

'He was going... the next day- the real reason he left the following morning- as he did not want to remember any more of this town- even if lovely- it was just too much for him to grasp.'

~*~

(Did it break his heart?)

‘It’s just a couple of days before the end,’ he said, of me letting go- ‘I need a break from planning my life, even if it has gone places that I have never dreamed of... if we can have had one night together- I would not be where I am at today- and for that- you have helped me.

‘Thank you!’ he said under his breath. ‘He felt bad about the untruth- within his story- but knew there was no way he could tell them the certainty of how he felt deep in the inside- of the truth.’

I remember her saying to me- ‘My daddy used to tell me that the first time you fall in love, it changes your life incessantly, and no matter how hard you try, the feeling’ never fades.’

He mummer here, say so wise for her age- ‘You have been telling me about your first love, I didn’t see it then- I do now, and what can I do that-a life no?’

‘And no matter what I do, she sits in here nothing but looks in my mind of her faces, and photo to keep crying her eyes out about life and pain- joy and hate alike, she’ll stay with you forever- like she did with me and never let go.’

‘I see me looking over photos more and more from the Ebensburg fair her holding a tabby bear, she was lost in the trances, like in that small café,’ the small park across the way the children’s carousel at the fair, all the chestnut trees, quarters going in the wishing well, so they could have more days together.’

‘I will be seeing you... someday... if I-a goes to see you soon. I thought that all the money in this world cannot make you happy- I would give it all to have you back.’

~*~

(Haunting voices)

I recollect- ‘She said it out- crying in twisted pain, dad looking in worry- she lost it... over this fall romances, with this girl and I want justice.’

‘That was the end, she never saw another day, after making the scrapbook of memories- a page on the internet, all the

ingredients of life- was complete- perfect, yes-? ...Perfect for love- passionate like hate, nevertheless- 'that's-a life... No?'

'That is when I found her- Zoey... down deep.

14 feet below- in the same pink dress as always.'

'The 17 years old girl, with dark eyes and brown hair, that was five nothing, and unclear to everyone that miss- understood her. The most beautiful girl in the world!'

'Her name is Zoey Shay, she is everything.

Hastings well remembered for! Yes, I admit it, I am in love with her still!

'You know you are in love when you cannot fall asleep because the reality is finally better than your dreams.'

'And so-o with that said my story here ends... after loving and losing, I found love and have a loss, find what matters in life is what living is all about, 'that is a life- no?''

Zoey- well you will always be remembered!

16

(The thoughts end)

'Isn't it obvious?' She shakes her head and pulls me toward the door. Back into the castle, where I just stay put, refusing to budge, thinking about death. Nothing is obvious... about life-ending too fast. Nothing makes sense anymore, to me.

She pauses, hand on the knob of the next door into a large sitting room, more than a little hurt when she says, 'I thought it was a satisfactory solution, for now, to cast the memories away into a crystal ball- and that was where I was heading, with Naddalin. But you would prefer I not to touch you at all, right now?'

That is not what I intended!

Not at all! I good- I need you here... said Nevaeh.

The next night it is a repeat of the last...

...That night- It was raining heavily. Heavy droplets pounded against the windowpane as the murky clouds obscured her view some yet not all. Now walking back to the walls of bones, looking

up, I see kids look ever so small from the top tower, looking down at me.

I remember what I have done, they are here over me caring about them now, standing out looking you can see the clouds, above that platform of the huge of 25 stories- French chateau castle turret there is a lighthouse above the biggest part of the hall rooms underneath, and the light above has somewhat rhythmic flashes of white, the castle sets high up in the air, on a rock that looks twisted like driftwood, littered with trees- that glimmer at night as if enchanted with twinkling lights within the branches and leaves, along with a copy truss bridge, over the waves.

Nevaeh remembered as a child paying on, that has the railway that rooms through the castle, and around its base. There is a 180 degrees panorama view within the bathing room along with the parlor, as described with large arched windows.

A twisting pathway- that comes from the marina, that is made of-of a long stone bridge with 14 archways, atop that tutor and Victorian-style building, that docks many sailboats, many windows, many stones, over 270 feet in the air is the tallest tower. Soft lights glow on the bride, and down the pathway; 19 towers with pointed gold-covered turrets.

The train comes in with a fogged glow around the puffs of steam, letting out more girls, to the school end of the castle, hard splashing waves, hit the rock faces, 3 to every minute, flying houses soaring around the tops of roof pecks. A slight Lilac haze over all the waters and skies.

The railroad wraps around then underneath the castle, itself falling about 30 feet within the cover, into a long dark tunnel, next to a waterfall, full of otherworldly animals inside, then exits to the tallest viaduct know to our world, hundreds of feet in the air, and it rocks side to side in the wind as the train goes over, the line is known as 'Tracks in the Sky.'

17

That night more thoughts come back to me, things that I have not thought about in years, rip through my mind. My brain goes back to when I was at school, made to go to the auditorium. I was a little girl when I was brought forth in front of the whole student body of thousand boys and girls of middle school grades, this day- I was made to were my panties just so they could be removed along with my lower skirt, as I was hunched over with my butt to them all- as they giggled at me- for being me, to be made a spectacle as always for my teachers to

paddle me- one by one all 100 of them took a hit, for deep down- they said to me, I knew I need to be pushed and have my ass red as it could be.

(‘The bad girl...’)

Only the top part of my uniform stayed on for what was an hour of mucking me. The paddle even snapped, where I would not have a case, over being the town’s delayed held back in progress of, development, or accomplishment child. The courthouse to make a case giggled in my face for even thinking of trying over I cannot think at all, for being classed braindead.

‘That’s not what I intended!’

Were the words that brought this back to mind? Then- I remembered something that I lost to time, of them molesting my mind, the love a boy had for me regardless. He was the boy love of my life, I wonder what happened to me, I wound why. I wonder too much... of the question of why- of this and that. ‘Baking hearts and minds,’ is not what I intended, it was all over my mind lost to the time of remembrances, and now- I must rewind the hands of time to remember in flashbacks.

It is said to me now even his name has lost all meaning to me now, to time. I try to even remember me at times, and those fads away like a death in a moment of time of loss, snack in the cold of the night, is a death like a memory.

I remember when Jaylnn was sent to the outdoor juvenal jail camps just for girls of her kind- um of the kind just like me, nothing I could do, yet she blames me still to this day, like me, sent away from me over they wanted to hurt me more, over I was not a fit parent, for being part of the town I never left, sent to work camps, they said she was a copy of me and the apple does not rot far from the tree. That is why when she came back so embarrassed by more mucking, she took her life, and yet again hurt me. I should have left her to be a high school dropout.

Her bones lay here too, within this long wall. She never had any more than a pre-K education, that was all they said her teachers and district that she could handle. I should have never let her stay in my hometown with me... I should have taken her out of school too. I should of, I could of... and the of... and if... hunts me. Odd, like- I could not save her from herself, yet that is the way she wanted it.

To have a child that was so gorgeous, so sexy, so amazingly awesome-and to not be able to touch her-is the worst kind of

agony, I have in this world. Fantasizing about the past- I come down with the feelings of a cold when we both know we do not get sick of reality, it is not likely, and other ridiculous avoidance techniques that left me feeling deeply ashamed of how I feel. It has been torture, simple, my health shows my life.

To have only one left in my life of lives, that is just the same, sometimes- I feel undeserving- for everything Naddalin has done for me, even today I call it being blessed. I whisper, the second we are alone again, how much I love her she is also my best friend more than anything. 'My always and forever.' 'I mean, I know we can't risk any accidental palm sweat exchange or anything like that, but still, don't you think it looks kind of odd?'

The hunted angel ghost of Jaylynn is next to me now as I sit in my chair; 'I don't care about that anymore' she said to me in a pulling long letting-out voice.' Her sincere, open gaze is fixed right on mine- into see-through eyes. 'I do not care what other people think anymore and still, you do, still, you do.

'I only care about you, and you are only.' Said Jaylynn to her mother.

Only moments went by when she then said this-

'Fascinating creature's we girls are then grown into women- when lost and longing for whatever the heart is looking for, always looking for a man to be into them- in always another cloud be, or another with more strength than a man could have, or she has at any given moment, always wishful for that understanding sweet, caring, hope, that she may never have satisfied, it's just the girl's nature, to always be unsure about themselves at times.' Said Jaylynn.

'So wise...' She said back.

18

Every night, I still hold on to Maggie's panties and sniff them remembering the keepsake of her life and mine at that time, the love- I had for that girl at the time, I was her rock- just like all the girls in this story- finding their way. I have kept them all these many- many years... something that I have brought over from the other side, dumb to some, I know or unpleasant, yet the love of things that were once yet needs a reminder of why by the senses is what I must do. Touch, feel, smell, and even sometimes taste is the memory loss that comes back to me when holding something so small acute in my hands bunched up. I have loved and lost, yet that is not always what I see, some have taught me, pain, some love, trust, forbearance, much tolerance, loss of

restraint, needed self-restraint, some resignation, to have stoicism, found fortitude, to have sufferance, pushing with endurance, a deep-down breath of calmness, found composure, and even-temperateness. it is what it means to be a woman! Bedtime is a time that was always long and drawn out for me. I lay in the darkness, unable to pass to the slumber, my mind always racing as it always did.

Then in her sleep, my baby squeezes my fingers... I look deep into the door open with her mind- as she passes me in, leading me right past Emmah and the other girls as we head for our desks, these are more dreams that have come true. Oh, how has time changed in the last 10 years, Emmah, I have not seen her for at least 5 years now. No, she was only there in her dreams for me to remember, the way she was. I find it in time to just cast away all memories, like pain- to keep from going insane. Sometimes, I am just that... crazy.

And even though I have not seen her since Friday, lost in my mind, when I- Nevaeh woke from Naddalin's spell, and it seems as if a year has gone by...

Naddalin- I am sure she hated me for it, yet it was a year of rest of being lost to sleep, yet her mood has not dampened a bit, with me being me the last couple of days and days well be all she thinks happened. I took her place, she needed rest.

19

The electronic tombstone was my idea with the screen, to playback a loved one's life, more than just the dates to help mend, yet never fully cope with the pain of loss. That is what I have in place for all the planets that I have made new homes for life, to flourish- death is always, an end to a fresh start.

Naddalin's looks to play that tired old game, of hope. But while I am fully braced for her usual ploy to trip me up- today she is too distracted by old ghosts too, while I am fully braced for her usual ploy of dropping her bag in my path, to see if I will fall over, she knows I am clumsy. Her unhurried gaze traveling the length of her, from her head to her toes, before starting all over again.

But just because she ignores me does not mean I can relax or trust that it is over with me I always said it was, yet with her games, I know more than she thinks I do, yet I trust her more than she thinks too, and I am more relaxed than she thinks also, that would be love, no?

I remember walking the halls- 'I was told that by AVA she was going to cut my head off and poop down the stump.'

Because the truth is, it is never over with Emmah, even now, and I have since left the past with her now behind. She has made that abundantly clear- that she blames me for everything.

20

If anything, she is more charged up and vicious than ever making the little reprieve nothing more than the calm before the storm, I know that Emmah is now AVA, I just know. ...Yet seeing is believing.

'Ignore her, all day and now for years,' Naddalin whispers to me saying it is okay to feel this way, scooting herself close the edges of her butt practically overlap my legs. Besides even though I nod as though I am okay with it all, the truth is- I cannot be it was always my little girl- yet she not that any longer she is a WOMAN. As much as I would love to pretend, she is invisible- I cannot do it.

Karly is the girl with blue hair, know Savannah, it was something she went back in time to do, using the crystal around her neck.

'We girls all from school love to swim with the mermaids, it's the best way to end the evenings.' This is the story of how we made them girls' part of us and our world.

(Girls like you and I)

Looking back on this look at the photos of this old book... there we are... like fading- into the scene... I and you can see all this play out...

'The shut Generation...' or so we were called- for just having a summer love and fun... That is the name of our softball team- not really... the name I loved... but that the name we got from them- The team's name was not what, I said- was cool- but I was not the one to pick it... Like so- we were the - Ponytail Express- or so the shirts said way oh back then. Just some really- cute kick-butt girls- having a summer of rivalry with other girls and finding ourselves... inside and out.

Intermission-

I am number- 19 for life... Her- um- she number- 14.

1

I have flashbacks, I recall- AGREEING with my thoughts I go back in time. I stepped into my room and closed the door; a sigh of relief escaped my lips.

The window of my room oddly was locked. I gripped the edge of my window and tried to push the glass up. I remember nights that I would sneak out, and go to the fields with her, I climbed the side of my house. Well, that was a big waste, I thought, other thoughts. School was a total waste of my time. Summer was all that mattered. Softball was all that was my world, and hers. The girl was giving me mixed signals, I remember it all, yet what I have is that one summer, one minute, she would be all over me, saying things like I like you and giving me peppered kisses but the next second, she had run away from like I had a something wrong. This was outside of the ball field. I am not an abnormal lady.

I wink at her. Who locked my window? I let go of the niche and landed on my feet. A dull sting ran through my legs. Oh, cramp... cramp! I pressed my back against the side of my house and crawled toward the back entrance. Mom was going to kill- if she found out - that I snuck out again- to see a girl. Dad would be even worse. I remember coming home that night after necking in the dugouts with her... and all the basses were run.

Coming home- I unlocked the door, put the key back, and slowly turned the knob, I pulled the scalation spare key out of the plant next to the door. I peeked through the glass door... then inside of my mom and dad's room, they never knew- so I thought, yet I am sure that would be short-lived. I ran up the steeps dipping wet hair entwined, it was running hard that night, it was after 10 PM, I went to put on my PJ's then went down, still scared, of what I did, and all the 1930's cars with their headlamps running me off the muddy road, to my home. After taken a long bath, in the tin tub, in the middle of the Kitchen, to only the flicker of my gas lamp, I made sure all the kitchen gas lamps were off- for the night. I snuck around the kitchen and hurried up the stairs. I remember I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

I heard my mother's voice calling me asking me why I had taken a bath at this time of night. A shiver goes down my spine. I am dead, I thought. 'Well, it's nice to see I remember saying to her as she was holding my hand taken me into the dugout.' What do you do tonight to have to take a bath? You know we only do that once a week?' I turned around and turned on my charm, 'Mom, what goes on- with your child? You look so today, in the face what is that all over it?

Mom- she had some weird stuff on her face. Mom smiled, her long hair pulled back into a ponytail, if mine if not longer. It is supposed to make her look younger; she thinks I think not. I bet she

looked like me, that why daddy loves her... for that, I am sure. Like that is possible, that he would love her more than me... too, I remember him. Then that all changed, to like me going through the change. 'This is the seventh time you snuck out this month! What is the matter with you?' ...Are you seeing a boy? No-ma.' I am not seeing a boy- what I was hiding from her as he was a- she and I were not lying was I?'

Is it wrong for me to want a girl? Damn, 'It is not like I am doing anything bad- or was I? If you noticed, I always come back by 10- and its summer.' I remember saying that to her. Oddly, my mom was too nice about it. Yet this was also a change in her. She raised her eyebrow, saying 'just don't get pregnant.'

Oh, 'You little.... If you sneak out again, your dad is going to take care of it for me, you will not live to see me tomorrow.' I knew that was not true, we did not agree, yet he was not mean, he just did not have much time for me.

I perched my lips, 'If I sneak out the day after tomorrow, am I okay- if I tell you whom- I am seeing?'

'Okay- tell me,' She said.

...And it was all okay- and I did not understand why.

-Then-

'We're good with this...'

She nods, and giggles- pats me on the head saying- 'yah were good, you can see here just get your butt back here by 10.'

'Summer love...' she mutters under her breath, 'this girl- what am I going to do with you?'

She shook at me at the steps saying love is love right, unthreatening. I hugged her back, scared- that I was sick.

I remember- my new dad walked into the room, feeling little in his arms- and my PJ's, pulling at my hair as if I was baby girl.

I smiled at my dad, in his baby like hold on me, even if he is all new to me it was nice- and wrong at the same time. Mom always had my side- or so I thought, so he would come around.

You snuck out again- he taps me on the nose, 'silly girl!'

'Boys... already?'

‘I like sports more da-dad-’ and my voice shook as I said that.

More like one of the boys...

‘You can say that again,’ whispered my mother.

You cannot be serious that this is, okay?’ Mom argued, obviously pissed that dad took my side.

Dad shrugged, ‘she is just a girl, babe. I used to do this when I was young too.’ Play is playing... its summer puppy love, that all.

‘Yes!’ I peeled in and Mom glared at me, in the low light of my room that was far too cozy and the wind blowing the drapes of my window, that was still open. Okay, bad idea.

Mom fluttered her eyes at Dad and bit her lower lip, ‘But he was not getting it- he thought I was normal, this is like the seventh time. She needs to be punished, to meet new kids.’

Yet, I did not feel abnormal, by kissing a girl and liking as the rain poured, in the dugout of the ball field that I loved just as much as she, at that moment, yet this was the first time- like- um- I felt love.

‘Disciplined?’ I gawped, ‘Exacting words, Mom.’

...?...?

~*~

Dad smiled, ‘How about we ground him for a month?’

Mom pouted, ‘Truly, I was thinking about whipping her with your beloved belt.’

My jaw nearly dropped, ‘Ma!’

Dad laughed, patting my curly hair down from his hand. I cupped my hands together and giggled, at the thought I thought was so true.

Mom rolled her eyes and pointed her finger at me, ‘Grounded for a month, missy and if you sneak out again, the belt will be your new best friend.’

Dad grinned and wrapped an arm around his new young wife, 'Goodnight as they walked out of my room just nearly closing the door.'

He hauled her out of the room, in her arms like he was holding me- it was gross. I smiled and jumped into bed, jumping also in the same leap out of PJ's. Grounded for a month- God! Yes, right, I see her tomorrow. By tomorrow morning- I was in love, Mom will forget what happened and I will be good. It will all be good. I am sure I said it over and over.

The meaning was the best thing about moving her...

(One day has passed)

I remember doing the same thing over- I screamed and dropped to the floor, my sheets tangling between my legs. Ow. This night when for more, more than ever...

She even laughed at me, and I got up and chased her up the road- saying she did not want to go home yet. Passing 100-year-old tree, and brick roads, she squealed loudly- I remember- when I touched her, as she pounded down the stairs of the bleachers- as if anyone would say anything at midnight- with nothing but the sounds of crickets- and the moonlight above- and us in a blanket holding hands her head on my one shoulder.

She ran into the kitchen, with me she was going to spend the night and creep out the window in the morning, and I grabbed up all the things that were a night of being- so bad, throwing her over my body. I tickled her and I heard someone gasp.

If my grandpa knew what I was doing, and if the town- yet I did not care... I was not shutting out what I wanted.

I stopped and looked up to see my mom's mouth hanging open, motionless- when she investigated my room that night. And I was in my bed with a girl... with a plate of pancakes in her hands, for two she sat in our bed say here, girls.

At the breakfast table was my dad, a little smirk on his face, when he asked who my friend is... face red about to burst into laughter any second.

Lastly, there was some girl I had never seen before. She has a lot of hair for a boy that has hair that has reached the edge of her shoulders. Her bangs swayed to her left eye at times.

She had small lips that were a light pink shade. She was an average Jane. Her expression was blank and blasé. To them but not to me...

Unenthusiastic?

‘This girl must be crazy, not to be home- or say she is with you.’ Said, my dad.

I was standing partially naked- the next night with her in my room.

Not to be overconfident or anything but I am freaking good-looking, ladies- said my mom as she passed the door.

I had the perfect tan and a sexy six-pack if I say so myself. I got my looks from my real dad, but he did not have a body like I did when he was my age. This girl should be drooling over me right now, and she was.

Her eyebrow dropped, still a bored expression. Whatever I give up. I shrugged and ran upstairs to put on some clothes, said my dad. I stretched my arms, flexing my biceps. I gave a short nod to the girl, and she was still unfazed by me. Her eyebrow shot up as if trying to say as if this was normal.

Mom stepped into the kitchen and smiled as well, ‘Thank goodness too. We will finally have a responsible twin in the household.’

2

(Going back in time)

Um, Dad? - Mm-hmm? I -I mean daddy. Like, do you- um- remember when like you- like- um promised you would teach me to play catch and softball? - Mm-hmm he said looking down at me so young then. Um, wa-well, could you teach me I remember saying looking up at him with big sad blue eyes?

So, with something that was incredible going on, it should've underway off with loads of wonderful things happening to me, but it did not. Anyways- I moved to the neighborhood two weeks before school let out. It was the same summer that Dodger Maury Wills would break the stolen bases record. It was the same summer that Dodger Maury Wills would break the stolen bases record. I was from another state, and I did not have a single friend in a thousand miles.

It was a lousy way to end up the fifth grade, because- um I had no time to make friends before summer. And that is about where it all started. My real dad died when I was just a little kid. My mom had married Dad about a year before we moved to the Valley. At the time, he and I were still getting used to each other. Yeah, I had followed them to the Softball Field once after school. I had never seen any place like it.

Look around I am new to this place, yet I see- (Girls are Shouting- yet not for me- yet anyway.) It was like their own little softball monarchy or. It was something... It was the ultimate place I had ever seen anyway. All the new girls for me a girl to see... and get to know, something that was taboo in my old town- that is why we moved here... a girl would be into me...

The year well it is 1931- the 1932 World Series is coming up. It was once said in a Girl's world, there is one all-time utmost moment in the antiquity of sports. We as girls do not have any girl to look up to on the softball field, do we...? The boys have there are, why is it not so with us? The story goes that in the lowest of the ninth inning with two outs, a full count, and the tying run on base, Babe Ruth outstretched his arm and pointed to the centerfield stands. Nope, not one single guy/gal believed it, there the swing- nobody had ever done it before those Girly times. He was calling his shot and I was looking up there down at him with my dad and younger sister.

It was in the greatest summer of my life up till the post before boys and drama of all that... when he- my dad taught me to play softball, and he became my best friend. At the edge of my seat, he is running home. As well as even if he had been an idol formerly, that the next pass, yea' all know that is how he became a legend- and my dream boy- well at that time anyway. 40 years later, a girl named Havilah Franklyn... became a district legend and my girl crush. Plus, she got me out of the biggest pickle I would ever be in... Clued McCoy plays his horn on the talk box... Bertram. Nonetheless, they were good, really- really- good.

Um- like- Come on, Bertram! As well as all I had was a plastic doll that my grandmother gave me... yet, I was more of an adventurous child... or so that is what other girls said about me... back there, for my birthday when I was six- that is when I knew I was not into boys as much as a girl- yet I liked both- just the same- yet, not sure. On the other hand- when I finally got up enough guts to go out there and try and make friends, I found out that they never- ever kept score- about stuff like that, they never- ever- ever- picked sides. Um- like they never even really stopped playing the game. It just went on forever- never stopping. Every day they picked up where they left off

the day before. It was like an endless dream game of dream girls. - Come on! Come on! Like it was... no- joke... There were only eight of them, so they did not have a whole team.

Squints! - Unquestionably, if I had known what was going to occur when- um like- I got there, and just stood in the outfield somewhere and took up space. Even So-o...? Even though...? I did not know how to play; I figured I could be the ninth Girl... I um- I like- got it! - um- I never would have gone. It was a nice catch; I saw for her... this girl... - Yeah it was looking at that butt and then the run... she made.

Her Dog was running after her, he was Barking.

Then they ran to me, he was Growling- she was looking dumbfounded at me. Puppy love... - Come on! - Hey, batter, batter, batter! No...! No... young lust- it is what makes the world go-'round at that age. They all said in the stands over the way - Whoa! - Watch out! Yet she hit hard, um- Come on, Havilah, another girl hit a homer- she did not see the ball all she was looking at was me! She ran into the pool and broke her nose... it looked good for a week or two. Like all- them- the- Boys Shouting about her messing up her face they want to kiss... as I do.) Oh, my freaking Lard she hit the pool... Screams- and crying... cry to mommy the d*ck-head of a boy said.

3

All of them- they were Laughing at her. Okay, I will get it, the ball that is... it was an effective way to meet, no? Get it... Hi- hi... Do not be a doofus. Do not be a doofus!

Do not be a doofus! She- I- us - we- thought. (Muffled Sound of two girls hug was odd- yet, it happened fast, Dog Growling at my hills... he did like me yet- yet she did...) we were like this too dumb long- all of them looking at us the game stopped as they want us to get on with it... (Get a room...) 'Kiss her...' one boy said- so I did.

Yes! They went nuts!!! Now

FREAKING- Throw the ball back- before I throw up! Come on! - Yes, the hurry freaked up- fat butt said way up in the sands! We are waiting... the girl at the mound said! Throw it! Come on! A broken nose- yet a first kiss- made her feel good- that was my story, and I stuck to it. Ha! Look at all the cute Boys Shouting that girl said to another... Come on, toss me the ball! - Come on! And I did and it cracked her right in the head- oppies- sorry... I spoke.

Come on! Oh, my God- Lovers hurry up! - Laughing Carry on and then ends.

Um- like- yeah- My freaking life is over. Did you see that...? Did yah...? Like dumb Boys Babble on, laughing... about things, they do not get... a Girl is describing his thoughts- shaking his head what the world coming too... like- If it were not for Havilah, I never- ever- ever- ever- made a single friend that summer before now, would I now- doing this- like that- like- to- her- like- now- like- at that- like- at that like- moment. Um- because all the rest of those guys thought I was a lost cause, so why not a girlfriend...? Why not... I was done with boys before; I was done with knowing what a boy hand- or did have. I thought if a boy can do it a girl was better at it... Even before we became friends, power-driven humming... and whizzing... she was wheezing... Havilah and I were associated, linked for the one moment... that would last, and last, and last, all summer...

Night, hun. The girl- Oh, I am sorry, she said to her mom. I said- It was an accident. That is when I would get us all into the biggest flipping pickle ever... any of us had ever seen. Jullie, have you made any friends yet? See your girlfriend you made today- No way. - Why not, honey? 'Because I am still new. And- she likes may not like me now that it is a new day- remember how they were... this is a new place... I do not want you sitting around in here all summer petty with this stuff... like you did last summer and the one before, find some girls... not a boy yet... um, do you like boys yet? NO! I know you are smart, and I am proud of you for doing what you think is right- even if it is a child. I want you to get out into the fresh air and make some friends or the sweet first love- it is time. Can that person be a girl? What? Um- not really what is right- yet I do not see why not.

You have my permission. Go a little crazy... play around... so that means full around some...

Um- you what now... age...

So-o I well did...

Um- Honey, I want you to make some friends this summer, or just one that you fall for... Lots of them are here, it just takes that one. And if she is a girl? Um- some boys are not ass's... but if she a girl... then go for it. Not too much, but some... more than I- or she- or we- or they thought we should. Like- get into trouble, for crying out loud- and crying for each other when we had to go home.

You can see us me and my little girlfriend Run around, scrape your knees, get dirty, and play in the mud. We- she and I- like being me- and being her- like we- climb trees, hop fences- and

snagging dresses. How Girly's mothers do you know who say something- like that to their girls? I Chuckled some at the thought of kissing a girl- little did she no- or she did... Well, no mothers, I guess would have seen this coming.

But I am not good at anything- or anything like that, Mom.

4

Well? How did it go- I am in love with her ma'?

Cute- I thought...

Nightfall- the field.

Honey, you will always be just a know-it-all with an attitude like that... you think you love her... see what's round first... Yet if this girl is the one then goes- for her... before a boy well... what can it heart I thought at the time... Face it, I am just an intellectual in my modern thinking- the good mother fitting in with the new whys of the day. Whispering is going around by the other girls on the softball field when it was just, she and I hanging, playing, and hugging and then the kiss, was all I need of the first puppy love to start- she had my heart.

Uh, Dad- can I, uh- yeah- fine- (weirdo he thought,) and we went off- I had nerves...

You go on back out there and ask her to be your girlfriend- she stands at the door of her home- mom looking from the car. Yes- yes- hug... it was official- I have my first love- even if she was, she... and not he... oh well. That did not matter yet...

The next night it was just she and I... I mean, could you, like you said, teach me to play catch, she showed me more than that too kissing and her goodies too? Like I was okay with that it made me feel loved, or funny... no boy did that yet... like why I would want to see that anyways... boys are ea-ck-y...

Yes... sure, this how you do that- and how you do this... wow.

Mom, it is okay. Honey, go to be with your little girlfriend. I said- I would, and I will, but I am under the gun here, she needs this thought mom. What could it hurt? Cannot you spare half an hour, and show her know how to play softball, she said to her dad- not so she can go with this girl... That is why is safe for me to say she can go with her... dad never had the time much... Mom, it is okay. - All right...

yes, stay the night... Okay. I will get my glove so the next night I just am there to play with her. See? I told you... this would happen said, dad... that it would go there... Oh, great, just what we want going to church my girl in love with a girl... (It is oh okay John.) They are 10 years old. What is it going to hurt... she needs this no... he puts a pillow over his head and yells profanities?

(Next day)

Okay... All right, Jullie, get down to that end of the yard, and I tossed it to her... she outstretched her arm and gripped it in her new glove, the ball was in her hand, and she ran to her and knocked her over legs around her now on the ground for the kiss she gave, dad said oh nice now see my kid dry humming this little one... one thing you need to know about this game she said... Where the ball goes, your glove should go. (You know I do not like balls she said- she is 2 years older than me.) (Dad said do I hear- grunts,) she on top of her... God save us... my babies going to h*ell? Got it- I have the ball... she yields... All right... her girl said... Uh, yes... was said- I think so.

(Oh, hush it is cute, said, mom.)

Fat butt said- garb her boobs... (Mom smacked her in the head. - Silly boys- see um John- that is why I am okay with her being with a girl. The boys like this here.) Umm- hum... that is all he said. No matter whether you are in the field or at bat, eye on the ball, okay, and she swings on got the home run... she got to all the basses... that all I say. In the game and with her playmate... Now, the key to this game is keeping your eye on the ball. Okay... Eye on the ball, okay? If the ball moves, move your glove.

Got it...?

Got it...?

Run for the basses- instead of running for her basses- one girl said named Jaycee- like she is just PO-ed that I am not kissing her- she made the middle finger in her mouth- and the gagging sound- then with a long drawing out- ou-ah- I want a boy, not you. Sorry, I did not see you make that pass- you are out. On-looking- It is all right. (No- no it is not... it is all-right John!) it is just a game of softball... um and after the game is over...?

He spoke.

We lost over you to lover birds... said Jaycee- she competitive... and not like the ground upon... Okay, I am ready to go

home and shower... you want to join me... sure... see this- yes- see that- do- this and feel it like that- and it feels right.

Giggling said, John, what are they doing in there... (mom-said- getting off...) There are little girls it okay... Okay... what would my mom and dad say? Yes... no, what they do not know will not hurt them... let them play and find them themselves'...

All right... what was that she asked me- your first cummie, that what that was- and your first fingering... I love you... that why- I did that... now do that to me... and I did... that shower was 3 hours long girls said Mom... have fun... dad by the stupid looks on their faces I would say that is so-o. see this stuff... what is it on my finger that was yours... I do not know- oh my god that cute... and she explained it all...

(What Dad has not been there.)

Now they are going to sleep together with just night tops and no underwire- what now they are married... (They're just young girls...) and we did in the same bed, and no night tops just our skin to skin... feeling and feeling and the love was like a game of softball... just feeling it out... until the home run. Playing with her hair... and holding her hand through the night until midnight and we eat together, and it was off to the field to play- you guessed it softball... and did all over... that was the perfect summer...

On the field I am pitching- that is now my thing... Here we go again... Okay. You just need a bigger glove. Throw it back to me this time. Throw it back girl- love you she yells and the cowed gasps. Um- what the freak is her mom letting her do- I sitting right here... what am I doing letting her have a life... that is what... if you knew you would shut the h*ell up. Okay- what a... (a look was given and that shut him up.)

Okay- Jullie, keep your eye on the ball, and not on me so-o much, I know it hard... and that makes you feel that way down there too but do not miss this... These girls are nothing but finger hole shuts on a team... said one older Girl... and the cowards started to go down... but that was not what it was about for us girls- it was for the love of the game and a love of two girls, that was wrong yet need a friend and some love. Hey, old ass sees this... Oh, My God- she put her easily my pants... and was lady-jam-ing me... in front of them all... and had me making faces. There call me that... I- we do not care...

Okay. Got it, I call the funds... over this...

Balls in the face- Balls in the face said the one girl with a lisp... Okay- she is screaming and crying- Ow! Oh, my eye!

Ow! Ow! Oh! Ow! Ow! - What happened?

- (She groans, and I held her it was my ball after all that I threw. My eye... baby- honey, get some ice. Ice now, please. – Oh no, I got it. Why do I keep doing things like this...? - Here you go.

At her home... the stakes... girl- those were for dinner. - Oh! -Just hold it there- baby. Nice and hard... said her girlfriend that was joking around with her- making it okay. Now press it against that eye- Yeah- yah- yah I got it.

- I just took my eye off the ball for a second, Mom. - Yes, but you caught it. (She is Groaning) -Just keep that on for, like, an hour. It will still be black for weeks. No amount of makeup will cover this, but it will not swell if you hold this.

Sorry... baby for throwing this that hard.

Got to watch out for that curveball of mine.

(She is still crying- yet I am holding her.)

~*~

(Three weeks pass)

Hey.

Hi.

I am going to play some ball. We want you to come. Do you want to go...? - No. Thanks. - Why not? Don't you like softball anymore? - Oh, yes, but- But what? No- I was not a tool too much by dad. But you have my gloves and I need you there. I cannot you see... it not allowed. Uh, I see- you do not love me? Not anymore- I cannot- No- I cannot go. Thanks, though, I must find a boy- or did well dis-own me... for all this... It is okay. All see if I can sneak out... here I got an extra one top- not your number but it is fine.

Come on.

Let us go, ha this feels dirty... I like it. Mom, I am going to go play some ball- yep- I will not tell your dad to go! Be back before nightfall- and be clean... and no fun-loving on the field save that for your room girls. I will be back in a little while. Come on. Let us go

wink- well be good at being bad their mom. Got it... that fine... she said- ha- we might not even go to the field... then... okay with that... Listen- I okay with this... not dad- so if you do that- that- you do not speak of it... its own you girls... all-right-ie? Umm-hmm... There is that dumb look from my little girl... I knew... what... she is happy. That is all that matters...

Hay- what- Check this out-there in her bed together... so you want to play softball or not today- no- just want to be here with you. (Boys') What? She questioned with flintiness Boy's suck- why would I want that- you are all I need. Now and forever. What? Long slow kisses she on top of my hair falling on my face.

5

Jullie- I had no idea who they were talking about, that he is not okay with us doing that it does not like you get a baby out of or something like that... like how that is happens... you do not know... you are 2 years older- see therefore she is cute and sweet. 2 years means a lot... no? - What did he say? That I was going to hell or something like that just for you, a girl loving me and making me feel good down there. Yes, what planet are you from I said to mom dad about this? I want you and that is it.

Jullie- But there was no way, I could let them know. You never heard of this... Is it not that odd? I hear yah- I had that talk too... yet not with a girl... so I had two talks that were really um... yah... after I am done here with you and then you down there on me you want to go to the softball field.

Jullie- so-o I lied saying I was dating some d*ick of a boy that we go to church with, just to make the town and happy and not to go to they said hell. You

CAN GO TO HELL FOR FEELING LOVE AND HAVE
YOU

Jillin' off each other and- Pushing the Red Button with our lips- then so be it. Look at this car of the Great Bambino. Of course, I have it too- why are there no girls to do this? Because girls like us do nothing in love with the clean house and make boys happy- and get impregnated at some point... do you know what that means? I do- that all my mother good for... 'I thought you to love you for you- and to love me for me.' Yes. I guess. Sorry- um no I am not... if it wrong- like I do not want to be right about it... I will always have you and the memories of the summer of softball.

(Back)

Anyway, Keara, that's Celia and Ashleigh Zadah, Jaelynn 'Squints' Palledorous, Lee Fredrick- we call her p*ussie for a week over not asking that boy out that want to go with her... what you came over to the dark said with us we said joking... Sheridan Nunnez and Shanaya Deshaun. We call her Fraps. Gal's, this is Keara, my girlfriend, and now you are a new player, I have been working with her all spring.

Hi. Yes, um, well, she is going to play with us because she is 11. Now we have a whole team. We are wasting time. Let us go to the Softball field. - Havilahny, it is doing you sleep well- yes always with you: oh god look at me in the morning. I know all gross - It is so nice to see you look like that with- the face, and the hair, and the eyes:

(Nighttime in the lights)

Um like - Why'd you bring her, Havilahny? - Because there are eight of us, and he makes 11. I will ask you again- like- why would you bring her, Havilahny? - Because there are eight of us, and he makes

11 and she mine- end of the story. SHUT UP!

(HUSH FINGER- TO HER FACE.)

Yes, yes, so would my sister, but I did not bring her, she the girl play and that is it... With 11 gals' we have a whole team, Yeah- Yeah, and you get your ho... at the end of it, what do I get her sister said... my foot in your butt if you do not get off my field- you stink at the game sorry. I guess, I go with a fat butt and get a cream soda... there you go... positive thinking.

(Play your cards right you just might get his without trouble your pants. Wink- oh god kill me... she said with the cute nod.) No. With her, we had a whole team. - She can catch- I would no. I bet you do... she said, one of them over the way - okay then throw- that what she is getting- pitching. - You saw the way she threw. - Yeah- not bad- right? Come on, Havilahny, girl. She 'isn't' game... said the opposing team.

All right. And now I get to rotate eight positions instead of seven. - I need practice, girls. - You're the best on the team. You do not need any practice. - No, you do not. - You're the best, Girl. Come on, Havilahny, Girl. The kid is... -weenie. Yes, yes. Oscar Mayer even-sucks that. I do not suck weenie- not even if it is a Footlong! What are you laughing at, yeah- yes? You run like you have a sick up you are an ass. - Mm, yes about that... do not ask... hush... Okay, okay, but I am-

I am- part of the game, right? NO. Now, how come she does not get to be, the one in...?

Um- because she is a geek, Girl, that would 'be' why - she cannot catch nor pitch as this girl can. Girl, base up, you are d*ick-head. Do you not like that remember.? Girl, you take the center, okay? Okay. Um, where exactly is that? It is over there, here, Girl. You and I are here that is called left. I said left-center-right. Okay. Right. Here? Here is the first pass- come on, Havilahny, Girl. Ha, she is never going to throw the ball right anyway. Let us just play. Oh yes, she well... What a jerk. - Yeah-Yeah that is how she is, gets to yah? Come on! Throw it in here or get off the field. Wow! - Nice.

- Woo- did you see the speed on that- excellent job! - Hey, Girl, throw it to second, and she did - Okay. Out... (All the girls made a gasp.) - Come on, Havilahny. He is never going to catch it. - He's not going to catch it. Oh! I told you, Havilahny. I told you... girls- she hot sh*it! Yes, she is the

Sh*it said- that girl. Come on, Havilahny.

Why would you have done that? A square, Havilahny.

The kid's square. Come on. Throw it in. 1 2 -file ball- out next girl up. Crybaby- go sit on your butt- and suck your thumb... you suck. What is she doing? She is making us look bad that what... I do not believe this- she can be that hot. I said that she said in that cute why twisting the wording to her girlfriends.

You can throw it; you know... Here... Sorry... Sorry... oh no... I cannot- like believe this. I do not knowledge, how you can do that- fastball...

I think I had better go... it getting late... we won yet the girls were not in love with me for it... it did not matter I had her- right? We hugged and called it a night- Hey, hey. You think too much.

(The next night)

You girls just have fun, this is softball. You got to stop thinking about her over there and play. I mean, if you were having fun, you would have caught that ball. No, you are giving goo-goo eyes to her... we see this... suck asses. When your arm gets here, just let go and throw it at her face. This one was a hard ass. Just let go, and well knock her out- It is that easy.

How do I catch this? This tall girl asked in a grope huddle. Just stand with your fingers in your p*ssy- and let it make your head-

that how you dumb sh*it. There and stick your glove out in the air... said another... it is not hard to do... well maybe for you. I will take care of it... side the one with dark hair... About time, Havilahny.

I am going into menopause over here... you do not even have the red death yet- okay then well hurry up- before I get, and it passes by me... scared- No...! It is not that bad, just a week of HELL, that is all.

Okay... why are we talking about me bleeding?

I told you, Havilahny. - They already are Squints. - Shut up! Girls throw it to second. (Fake- groans of what she got in the last game making fun of her for it.) - Not again... are they going to do this grow up and get you- butt heads... it is coming for you too... - (so she spits- to make it seem like she all tough.)

Please pitch it. We are wasting time, Havilahny. Please catch it, please catch it, please catch it. She said as it hit her in the left boob... Yes! That how it is done get in the bra- yah well at least I have one that not a trannie... Yes, her nose is bigger than her boobs... ha! Like her feet and IQ. - All right! - all right... stop... I told you so, Girl, drop out of school you are dumb. Okay... can you be my man and have my babies then if I do?

Shut up and let us just play some ball. - Yes, let us play some ball, and not with each other for 5 seconds... All right. I knew it... all the time. Yes! Just flash them and get it over with... shut. Hey, the baby boy up there she said to this old man... you like these... she squeezed me in-front of them...

(The fence was rattling with booing over us being we girl on a girl here... I get it.)

(Gasping was made by them...)

I will show you some more tomorrow, okay she said to him this down here.

F-n sick these girls he said... - Okay. Bye. - You did well with kissing too and the feeling up. See you later, Hun she said to me, tomorrow- 'K.'

Bye... (said) See you tomorrow, Havilahny? - Yes. See you later, Girl.

Havilahny, wait. - Your glove, your hug and kiss me. NIGHT! She took off her hat in there, and let her hair fall like- like a

Girl- like I wanted- her to do. Oh, yes. You know, it was the only one I had. But there is a story to this ball... Not anymore. Wear my old hat like my underwear, something to remind you of me... like I am rubbing on you, and the small of me... you will love it.

(New day)

- Oh, um, you got a fireplace. - Oh, yes with number 3's ball on it.

Oh, yes. Hey, Girl. Her home for the night- Um, bring a T-shirt to sleep in the okay night- in bed see you tomorrow, okay? Yes, why? Tomorrow morning, I will eat sugar and milk. Mom, guess what? - Shanaya 'The Babe' Chuckles eating to from mom- chest.

New gameplay ball- 'Long-ball.' Come on, Nunnnez. They were all laughing and picking on Me for wearing her underwire, and hat on the field so much so-o a girl panted me- and her name was on them with love you forever. Ha- ha- Yes, okay. Yes, I see it. Yes.

Do you call that pitching?

This is softball, not tennis.

- Give her a tennis racket, not a bat. - Give me something to hit then loser.

All right, babe This is my heater; I know how to feel her right she said... to the crowds...

- I dare you okay she said- (Boys Shouting- girl loving it... there were all stand and see-though-sh and boy-shorts style. Hot pink- too- and I an adventurous child at heart... not too boyish but you get it.) - Whoa! - (Boys Laughing- their hearts on them...) funny that was that hat was on here... as she runs the bases to get off... and there were more jokes about that... hit it she nude run down the failure there not why they have this game we do- we do those girls shouted. - You'll be sorry for this she said... running for the dug-out- paint and now too big of undies at her feet.

Ha did even have to go the speakeasy for a free show said, one old man...

3rd round-

- Give that girl a bat. - You want the heater; I will give it to you.

Give her a ball to hit not that covering crap. Maybe then he will hit it, and well keep dressed...

- (Clattering) - Oh, Girl, you have a nice one she said!

The boys said too bad you can see it for all the black hair there- ha...

Yes! That is how you do it. Great, you idiot! I cannot hit that... that is the point... Bab, you idiot. Hit me with the heater one. My turn- you know who I am- her girl- flyer- Now we cannot play anymore. Stupid idiot! Home run... How do you like that... Did they say? High and outside. Just like that, it was all over for the other team.

No!

- Girl! - Girl!
- What are you doing? - Girl, wait!
- Then how do we get the ball back?

I am going to hit you! Called shot by the Babe. - Girl, come back! - Hey gals, I will get it! Get off! I was with her last night- Guys, I got to get the ball! What...? The one said that was hearing the dirty ball chat over the way...- You're going to get yourself killed if you go in there! The old train yard...

- Killed, Girl, jeez! There over 100 tracks there- or something like that... yah the story was a girl who lost a leg dance with one and the track move... and now she has- well one... end of the story... yah she up there looking at you like what the h*ell...

Holy crap, you could have been killed. It is okay only three trains were rushing at me- head-on- and it had to land on the one where there were no side rails on the overpass... and I was chased off by it; yet I made it... just in time.

Yes, yes, true. What are you doing going on those?

Overall that water... and danger... and rusty-ness...

It is good to be fast- love you she said- as I panted for air- back in the hug... do not leave me...

- No, wait! - Get off me!

Now! I WOULD LOVE TOO BABY COME OVER
HERE-

Oh - ha she is touching her on the 'Munds' and BASS
PLAT again.

Stop! Before I toss my cookie's...

You were leaving, so I just thought I would hop to the
fence--

- If you were thinking, you would not have thought that.

- You cannot go back there.

- We do not have more balls- no unlike you- I do not get more balls... when the ones you have fuzz out... - We do not- like-um- either-

- Kiss it- yah kiss this- kiss it good-bye. And shut up,

Ashleigh.

It is gone, Girl. Gone.

The game's over, Girl. We will just get another ball tomorrow; you do not get that that was my grandfather's ball- number 3- nothing impotent to most- but it was to me... it all I had. - Yes. - We'll never see it again- of what team- New York- WHAT? Why you play with this- it was for here and you girls that is why... it is just a ball- right?

Girls listen to me, never- ever take mummeries like this and trash them out for me or them... that dumb... okay.

Look, it has more of a story now you added to it.

- But... I-I think- well yes maybe so-o.

Come on, Girl let us walk home into the sunset.

(Girls are Whispering as they are holding hands.)

- Shh!

- Shh! - Be quiet.

- SEE WHAT THERE SAYING- IT GROSS- YOU DON'T WANNA KNOW.

- (Growling) - (Gasp-ING)

New game in the old run-down Vincent field we got a ball-
Something got the ball.

(Jullie) Hey, guys, sorry I am late, long story and drama
today- feel you in after the game...

- My mom made me put on my jacket, - Shut up!
- Mom- okay your nipples are hard- yet you do not
care... (girls laughing)
- And then she made me do the dishes- when I came
home for backtalk...

Your poor little mommy made you do the big bad- butt-
dishes to be turned on to your shut.

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I have not had anything yet, so how can I have some
more of nothing- by you?

- Shut up! - You're killing me, Girl- do not be a P*ss.
- All right. Who cut one? - These are s-mores stuff.
- Okay, pay attention. -Bertram!

First, you take the Bab, balls away- then stick the
chocolate on the Bab- and make her not cry. - Then you roast the
'mallow'. - and put her in your sleeping bag. When the 'mallow's
flaming, she comes for you... YOU'RE A TARD!

Yes, it is... that was dumb even for her... the shit your girls
say...

It has a yellow stain on it- her bra... yep, I have one more
than I can say for you...you stick to rubbing chocolate- on here okay.

Night at my home campfire-

- You're going to set the place on fire, sleeping with her
out under the stars... holding hands- yes please - you cover all that up-
naked girl's naked girl- it with the other end you zip the bag you two. -
Make me one of those- mountain pies things and she and I will share it

in a kiss-ie bite- and turn you all on or off. Just suck face and get it over with said the one.

I do not like that chocolate stuff- said the one girl...

How the HELL do you not like chocolate as a girl?

Messy, but good...

Yes, like- a boy- messy, but good... Try some nah- I knew it.

Okay. Quiet, you.

• (Chattering about boys and what they have and do not have...) - Shh! Shh! Dad is over there- looking at us... Quiet! Are you trying to wake everyone up? Look at these two... go... I just went to go to bed, but no- I must look and hear this... the air in this tent is 100% cummie and fart... Shh! We-e no-o.... That was the Beast one ever I hear her say. – what the fart? NO.

• Oh, yes! - Shh!

-Jeez, – Dang-dongs.

Shh.

Now quiet.

They said- until forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

(Echoing in my mind.)

You are just making this up to scare me.

Oh, yes?

Stick your head out that window... oh, that was just your dad over the way sleeping- not a bear, not a bear... it is all good.

All those stories getting to you- yes, I peed myself a little at the showed... I know that fat butt wants to make us freak us if he can.

...And look down- to see if any boys are creeping on us out here... we know that if we stay out here past 10:00 dad going to go, and we can do whatever... so shh.

And that what took place... no boys that night just girlie time... under the stars...

Dad finally came around- after giving up on me, and his-well church of 30th years.

Jullie- That night I learned that more than softballs... and a girl had a bit that what I will call it... and my game started-

(New night)

Wow- first hit and it had gone over that fence, and not one of them was ever seen again, that ball was gone... and here it is a ball that was signed by your pap, and I have it funny how things happen. It is yours for being mine- like fate or something...

- even when some brave kid... went to get it to brave she could not- but I knew it was there and I have it for you 10 years later.

- Because when they went over, they vanished, those boys knew that- but us girls are fearless... I knew it was true, that he played here...

- Because when I looked down the line on the past.

I knew; he was from these parts... growing up...

Stays with me- forever, she said- as I remember THE Shut Generation... thinking back- anyways... forever we said- no longer in puppy love, it was love.

- Come on, give it to me. - I want to carry it, and hold on to it forever...

(In her hand)

- Come on. I paid for it. - I want to carry it.

(Looking at it)

- Oh. Whoa! - Give it to

me... and you keep mine... (She passed two years ago.)

(This is all I have... now...)

- What's the matter? – Jeez... Now I thought that I have lived my life... (going down a completely alternative story... yet I remember what could have been- that year- playing softball.)

- Whoa! - Wow (smack) Run- Run - There goes, my baby!

It is time to go home, alone tonight girls... so you all have some family time... and time away, what can I do? Now I am alone so all alone Whoa-oa no- there crying for each other... There goes my baby in the car... - Whoa, I- I- I- I do not know what I-ah-um going to do.

There she goes she is calling my name- Whoa-oa-a... come on, let us go Mom said.

We must get – home on time tonight without you talking about it! Did she love me- Mom- ah- Yes! And I worried about you two- becoming insuperable- with each other. You are never- ever apart. And what is wrong with that? She said questionably... Nothing really- Mom said back with hesitation.

The night was long, and I did not sleep without her; like- next to me... as you would have imagined.

She and I - Come on. Let us go.

Let us go! Come on! 3- and 0... let us do this...

– Okay... (Everyone is Gossiping about us.) -Was she just playing the game... We got to get to the Softball field. Let us go.

Look at her, she is a painting I am sweating like a pig needing mud.

Where have you been, Liz and Jodi? Now we have a team on the other side... let us go. We have been waiting here forever already. Jodi was perving with a boy and that is why. - Shut up. I was not. -

Yes, yes, you.

Your tongue was hanging out of your head- ha and hanging on his she said, and you were swooning, SHUT UP! OH, SHE

JUST MADE FOR SHE NOT GETTING IT, LIKE SEXY OVER HERE. Oh, Jodi Shane, my darling lover girl. (Chuckles made by the girls all around.) I said shut up! I have a lot of things on my mind. Rubbing heads is not one of them... or shaking hands... no, but feasting is? Said the girl over number 10... that no one liked. This pop is not working, Havilahny. Keep um- coming like before- what up with you today- no sleep that is what... and it too hot- she has her sleeves rolled up- nice bra... It is 100 degrees out here- you can look at it. You cannot play softball, and the one girl walked up to her and rip her number 14 shirt down both sides making it show her tummy to... like a loose tank top. – there how do you like that... there just boobs get over it.

(Young- boys are going to be shouting for her...)

- You must call it for the day it is too freaking hot- we should just go swimming- like butt naked. - You got to listen to her, Havilahny. And cool down some... look at you... Vote then. Anybody who wants to be... here said- (I) Not one girl- that end up naked in the pond... and it was dusking- look at these nasty girls- said the one Mom- oh well said mine- it hot and there young. (See all the girls in low light?

Splashing about... yelling... and playing.)

Fine, fine, fine!

Be home at 11:00- Okay- she yelled, and it echoed.

So, what are we going to do? She said as they were side by side... (both girls are laughing) Look two freak pools, honey! Over the way... said their girlfriend... making fun.

(New day it is raining thunder storming.) Mud-a- sliding...

Jullie- Havilahny would have played ball all day, all day, rain, like, tidal wave, and whatever- love the look of the matted down hair said the one girl. Look at us... like a wet dog- said the one- yah small too. (Thought- Softball was the only thing she cared about... other than me.) But of all the things- we had us- and softball, at the time that was all we needed. Or going to the pool was what he tolerated best if plans changed.

Sleepover- going throw dads stash-

Even though none of us had ever seen a Playboy magazine, we knew what we wanted to look like- never going to look like that down there I said- why- do not ask... well, those are some boobs she has- yah you wish right... nah- I like just a tank and that is it... feeling like a boy- look at all the fuzz on that thing- u-ha, right? No, look at this one... now say I gross- too. Ha- ha- ha... do not look at it- or were lezzie too!

Which we constantly lied about now wanting yet really did- see my girl was 2 years older see and have and doing before all of us, so yes you get it. We figured going to the pool was the next best thing to being one of those girls- we wanted so to be. I remember you-like this for always- Oh, sexy girl- she said like a weirdo.

(Funny I do.)

Hey, girls- look at this one too... what now play doctor...? Um-hum... like what you see? She runs out of the tent- hot night outside with the girls was the best thing ever- never- ever wanting the sun to come up...

Night swimming- Cannonball!

(Screaming... I am nak-ie... who jones me?)

- Aw, Girl. - Yes, yes.

Too cool.

She does not know what she is doing, up there on the board... nice P*ss the girl said... she rubs and said yes you like...?

(Ashleigh) She does not know what she is doing- there or there...

What did you want to show her how it was done?

Sure- she said back to that...

(Havilahny) Yeah, she does.

She knows exactly what she is doing, said the other one... the whole time was in the water... looking at her standing there dripping. I have swum here every summer of my young life- some with her some of them all was in the buff, like a hidden spot- away from all wondering eyes.

Were we girls could be girls...

I cannot take this anymore! And she and I did the most desperate thing... you would - had ever seen- with your eyes. Two little girls were no longer innocent... UM- she said- Let us just do this- One day it became too much... and this girl made out on the board and went all the way inform of us all- BUMPER-TO- BUMPER:

Vagina-to-vagina, JOHNSON BAR'n- MAKE SCISSORS OF SOMEONE- hard coring... said the one girl... in a Y'all... woo! (Chuckles- look at them go... she showed what she Know's- right girls- she said- like Napoleon a little French d*ick- that she is.) - What's wrong with them not caring about us looking at this? There is a mood that all- you will get is when you are older. - What's she doing to her? If you do not get it do not ask...!!!

(One summer of this... and it lasted a lifetime with me.) She finally snapped- said the youngest of us all- never seeing this. I do not know... SHUT UP AND LOOK- But that is WRONG- then go to the deep end, and swim alone.

(Giggles!)

- Somebody helps- her she is mooning! -

Squints! Are made at her for being dumb...

Somebody helps- her! Come on! You do not know...Move back. Move back- she said. - Come on, Lizzy, you do not get it? She is rolling over looking at her sawing- you are dumb- that was good. Never mind! Never mind! She was red-faced... still not getting it. - Come on, - Come on! I will let you in on it over there in a swim... - Come on, Squints. Come on. Like you need to wake up. - Come on, breathe and I will tell you? You can do it! Pull it and move about, bud!

- Come on, Girl! Come on! - Yes, yes. she looks.

pretty no- here do this.

Oh, God, she looks like a dead fish there to help her.

(Girls) What?

• This magic moment for a girl like you - (Muffled Grunts)

• (Screams) Little pervert! - So different- is this she said... oh, - 8-year-olds.

- Oh, Girl, she is in deep in that sh*it. - And so new to it- lay off some-

Until I kissed you- and made you feel okay you were like her so- remember that.

And then it happened...

It took me her and then by surprise- it rocked... out of her- new to all of us too... what was that? I knew that you felt it too... be what was that? - By the look in her eyes, it was a rush of spraying out! Softer than the summer night sounds heard then the rain pounding down... it was- she said.

This is what it is like for her and me- Everything I want from her and more- she knows you not saying crap to us. Whenever I hold you tight- I feel like you do now...

The magic moment-

While your lips are close to mine, it right...

This feeling will last.

forever and ever... and you will want increasingly... if you find the one. Oh, hey, here are your glasses. Did you plan that? Of course, I did. I have been planning it for years. You, she planned that right- that! She knew what he was doing! Right?

Yes, it fine... I think... Oh, the magic she the young one of us walked a little taller the next day. We had to tip our hats to her for it. We would not have blamed her for bragging. Not another one among us would've ever in a million years... get there as she did.

She had kissed a Girl, at 8... never... would I- her mom said, that all she knew thank God.

And she had kissed her long and good too. What is wrong with this generation- nothing but shuts, all this came from you being with those to sin- asses playing softball- it needs to stop. NO- she cried- there the best thing ever to happen to me. She got banned from the pool- whole forever that day. She was missed but we moved on... But- like now- every time she walks by after that, we saw her give thumbs up- like giving a sing- remembering that- that magic moment and we all smiled.

‘All my ladies listen up If that boy is not giving up. Just lick your lips and swing your hips Girl all you got to say is- My name is no. My sign is no.

My number is no. You need to let it go.

You need to let me go. Need to let you think go.’

-Meghan Trainor

- While your lips are close to mine, kiss me and call me mine. O beautiful she is, knees knocking feeling that feeling, girls talking get your glove and come on. - What's the big deal? Hooked on a feeling... it now the- Night game. Come on. Come on. - Mom, I am going out! In emancipating conflict... of flying balls- ready to be hit, I see her run... all it right with the world, with me.

She was my girl-

Hold my hands- kiss me in the night- (Fireworks Whistling after the game.) Who more than- self- the country loved we were?

Late-night- she had to take a nap- her head on my lap. I shook her softly to get her up... come on- wait for up- I whispered in her eye moving the hair away- then kissing her cheek! - On the of July... the whole sky would brighten up with fireworks, giving us just enough light for a game. We played our best then because, I guess, we all felt like the big leaguers... Now we- be- under -them- the lights, I hold her butt with both hands before the game stats... I know how she loves that... of some great stadiums.

Havilahny, felt like that all the time- not wanting to let go of each other.

We all knew she was going to go on to improved games, at some point... but she was mine for the summer. Because every time we stopped to watch the sky, I saw nothing but her running in my mind now and forever... on those nights like regular preteenagers, she was always there to call us back to her- not let me go.

You see, for us, softball was a game, and the game was- us- playing it and each other. But for Havilah, softball was life- and manly for me... loving it- and she is loving me for it. Okay, hit it! One on first, one on the second run for home. (Girls are Shouting run- run- run you: S of A- B.) - O beautiful- for spaces sky- under sapphire- blue and deep purple mountains some time feeling her majesty... all I thought, was about her and feel those feelings in and out- And every jot divine- Yes, yes, come on come for her and with her playing with me.

(Fireworks whistling, crackling over our heads her head is on my chest, her fingers rubbing my body- she is troweling my hair in her fingers.) Havilahny, for spacious skies, IT WAS SHE AND I! This was the need of the innocent- her hair falling all around me. Above the fruited plain, she was all mine... I was not sharing with any boy- ever, not for one single minute.

I am talking about- Her- sweet- Her loving- her like- I love it here in America. You know- God did she would lady her grace on thee- ha like me. He-He-He crowned they do not get us- but we get us- that all that matters.

Yes, she did. – Girl, it was love- and nothing but it! - From sea to shining sea, shall never- ever- ever- ever- leave me! We spent hours there that night. Just lay here with me... hart betting- feeling, seeing touching... eyes looking into eyes... heavy breathing- for each other.

Back off! A boy was next to her asking too many questions- as dumb boys do.

Run!

With me to get to back off... - Come on! Hurry up! - First! Into the woods... as you can think things happened there too... yet I let that out and of to your mind to go there. Come on!

Come on! Come on! - Come on! Hurry up! - Go, Havilahny!

Yes, yes! I no PG, right?

Think dirty- YOU NO YOU WANT TO!

Oh okay, kiss me here... is all she said to me... under the thick trees.

(She and I are Groaning) - Oh, damn!

New game- new day fresh start to whatever this is... Throw it in! Throw it in! - Get her! Get her!

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Noon. In our field. Oh, no! Fighting- with the girls over there over a boy - Shut your mouth, Phillips. - What'd you say, crap face? I said you should not even be allowed to touch a softball or my boyfriend... his mine not yours ever! PISS on you-you does not own

him. You are all an insult to the game, and to him, get off my team I had to say. Come on! We will take you right here, right now! And I did- catfight- one of those hand slapping types where no one gets hurt yet the hair is pulled... and shit is said you do not mean. (All

Shouting in agreement and arguments.) -

Come on! -

You are not good enough to lick the dirt off our cleats like you? - Watch it, jerk. - Shut up, idiot!

- Moron!
- F-n shut!
- Butt sniffer!
- P*ss licker!
- Fart smeller!
- C*mm-ie guzzler (Sniffing) Ah! From the girls... You eat her crap and others down there for breakfast, lazing geek.

You mix your undies with your mama's jam in them and do not care you still wear um!

- OUUUUHHHAAAh!
- Right on I said.

You bob apples in the toilet and suck on the shit!

- Unlike you, I never took a dump on some girl's chest or sat on her face- lick and stick that all I am saying!

- Ooh. - You play ball like a girl!

I am a girl-

Really?

Pee-drinking crap face!

D*~C-K- suck!

V*g- slip breath.

What did you say?

- You heard me.

(At this time, they did know what they all meant yet it was to see who the best at it was. Swearing that is...)

(There all Laughing at me...)

Break it up-the old guys are now on the field.

Tomorrow- okay I said to her blood run down her face- from getting hit in the nose.

All Right- no girls it is over-.

Yes!

Let us go!

We are going to kick their butts tomorrow.

Yes! I remember saying.

- Excellent job. -Jerks. I sit in my hand and shake hers on the other side.

Pre-game- Come on ask her for me.

Do you think she would go out with me? One girl in the field asked me about my sister... sure I can do that- what want to be like us? Umm hum... - Let us see what you got- what this- no not that- let the waistband of your pants go- God.

Play ball! Hurry up, batter. It is going to be a short game, and I got to get home for lunch today. (Snickers for other girls- daddy going to bath you too...) That is one. Sucked hard for it was true, yet she plays with it...! What's daddy say about that- he knows... SHUT UP- it is not something to talk about.

The batter said from the other team- The Swinging Singles ladies- You know, if I had a dog as ugly as you, I would have killed it by hanging it on my flowerpot hook outside my door. The heater. I said- I would shave her P*ssy and tell her to walk on her hands for me. And she missed the ball by a mile and throw the batt in the swing... it that girl in the girl box with it... both looking at me with that pelvic bone vagina slap -face look- you know bent overlooking up- all goo-g-a-lie- 2- Here it comes, in the teeth... why to play dirty... and hardcore

said the one girl on my team. I dare you-you to do it again- yelp- she did and chipped her tooth... good times- good times... Strike three.

You are out-and she went home to daddy crying- sitting naked in the bath for him to wash the blood off for talking crap to my girl!

Hey, is that your sister out there in left field, naked? She was targeted by one of the fighters on the other side, like before... she went for the bottoms and rip them down her legs, this time there were no undies on her small body- for she was not having a repeat of before... so- this was better Mom said. You know the sexy call she got for that one by the cowards... - She's naked. - Shut up...! Hey, hey, hey, look at the little fuzzball out there...

-I am just trying to have a little friendly conversation with her mom knowing what we must put up with these two. Come on. Show me your stuff, she said... I see it but it does not get old.

- Hey, batter, batter, batter! See this-

(She points over and over) this is my butt- (she bent some to the left- butt popped and pushed out to the one side) - Yō- you- kiss it! Nice but hun now um- ah- cover it up!

- Take him out! - (Girls are shouting- things that would get your mouth washed out with soap.)

- Come on! - Bring it!

- Oh! Beat Yah... Home- safe!

Throw it to third!

Got it- Got it- um- do not get it- UMM-ha- they both hit hard- the coward- ow-wah! That is going to hurt! Eyes tighten and squinting... in feeling pain... (this is footballing no need to pull on the shirt dumb girl...)

Jullie- We were all walking in midair that night or so it seemed. It had been a rock-hard win. We beat the crap out of those gals in more than one way. So, we all went to celebrate- up at the cream stand- an old train station made into this. (Sniffing... she was...) The best! We have done all summer girls. Mom-Jeez, Girl. I suppose prod of you... and your grandfather would be too. Come on. I want some of your Ice-cream to let me have a lick. Sick- sick said, one girl. - Mm. Mm.

Mm. she said- o-uh you are all sickie- yah I am- so you like my cheek too?

- Yeah! - Yes!

Mm!

- Yeah-hah! - Yes!

You two stop before I yack on the cream...

All right!

Yes!

While I am gone, you are the Girl of the house.

Understand? - Where are you going? – Chicago overnight... so you are here in New York- as a grown-up for the weekend... - Okay. - Okay. On business for a week... is what your dad said- so that is why I am going with him... you get it... Yes,

Mom... keep um- next to you...

- Take care of things for me.

- Okay.

- All right? - I will.

- Okay.

Be a good girl... said dad, like I was 5 years old.

- I will. - Okay.

Hey girls- I have some of my dad's- Tequila and we all chugged it down- the next day was so awesome- (Vomiting) - (Vomiting) - (Vomiting) Oh, that feels better. Thank you: crapper rim for being cold... Oh, okay. Mom was cool about their dad no... his little girl was the shut off the century... and that was not what he wanted with me. Mom- Honey, are you feeling all right? You look kind of pale. - I am fine, Mom. - Are you sure? - I am fine. – I am all right.

There was more nakedness in one home than your eyes would have believed those nights... But the day we all got back together for some softball... the same weekend in the mud... ass naked this time- even more fun playing in the thunderstones said, one girl.

Mudslide's... it was just us girls we knew agents well us girls... so, 5 and 5. It was the day I got us into the biggest pickle of all time, the day I got my period, and it ran- inform them all.

Oh, Girl.

I do not believe it.

- Bitchin'. (Havilahny)

No, it is not yes, it is I would no- oh wow.

Like- you ever busted the guts out of a ball- that is how she is feeling now.

- Must be an omen- no it not like that- does your mom teach you anything? - All's it means are you getting older. It is only a week of hell: and I just ruined the entire day for us, boys get off easy in life... no? said one girl. No, you did not.

That is the most amazing thing I ever saw, said the one... why?

So, we keep making more of us... I heard Mom say about it.

Game over-

- Yeah. - (Havilahny) Anybody got any money we- can go to a movie? What, you got extra cents lying around, Girl? Yep, for you... I do. Well just sneak in the back door. Movie? Yes, we can, (All) No- you girls have fun it will just be she and I. — okay then, because now we cannot play no more with this so- we were in the darkroom looking into each other's eyes- you know the love scene was right. Popcorn and kissing... freaking out all the old men in the room too... by feeling her up. We walked off and I heard- I got it, guys! I got it! I got the ball, guys! It was the saddest feeling ever- yet I was with her so... you win some you lose some... I got it. Right here, guys... I see the ball in her hand as I walk off feeling like crap. I got the ball.

I got it.

Batter up! One week later or so- Here, Havilahny. I got it. - Bitchin'. Your ball to pitch, you are up, God it feels good to play some- Here you go... coming your way.

- Okay. All right. Come on. Sheridan, here. Come on. Yes, come on! Fastball! She spoke. (Sighs) Your fly's open, oh yes just

getting some air up in there... that all- I no. Yes, you-a got-a air it out-a sometimes- all part of being a woman...

(Snickers) HA- ha- ha! The look she gave- just flipping killed us...

(All) Hey, batter, batter, batter! Swing...

You suck-

'You suck at life- shut up!' There is one.

One, two, three.

Three strikes, three pitches.

- Come on, Girl! - Hey, batter, batter, batter!

Oh, my freaking lord-e.

Oh, Girl.

- Run! – dumb shit run- Yes!

Way to go, school beat meat!

I taught her everything she knew.

Everything....!

...?...?

Me- Oh, Girl, that was great.

Her- That went clear over.

Her- Hey, uh, Girl, third base is that way.

We won...

8

The 4th. Mom- Hey, that is my Girl. Dad- Girl you are doing it. Said up in the stands... - Go to third. - Oh, no. Oh, no.

Yes! Nice hit, Girl. Nice hit. Yes! Said, my dad. - Oh, no. - It is out of here! She spoke. Who has the bat hit now? This -> girl <- right here. She double points at her chest over and over.

Yells- Girl! Yells-

Woo's too. 'What is she doing rubbing her nipples said one girl...?' Ha- all of them were giggling. The shock of his first homer was just too much for her. Yes. And she thought she could only pitch? She got home- good for her... beginners' luck... We got to get that ball back. - Oh, yes, right- it is on. - Good one, Girl. - (Laughing) Yeah, the good one, Girl.

God- I feel all sweaty- you were it well- I said to her. Gross...! Eyes looking at me weirdly down the line for saying it. (Are you kidding me? I look mixed with repulse and loathing.)

- Fagot!
- Whoa, what? I said... ah-

(sighing) defending her like always.

- That the dude- man?

One of the others said.

- Oh- she looks up dumbly.
- Yep! I said shaking my head... side to side... left and right- you get you are not a dumb bum like she is... or are you...?

Hey, forget about it, Girl.

Let us get another ball game.

'Yen-all No if you do not understand it! And yen all do not get what you are saying they do not say if- you look like a dumb bum! - she said.'

Listen to me, Girl.

It is a matter of life and death, just get smarter... before talking crap about her.

The story started-

Did you play with the babe? - Played with him in a field? - Yeah, but I was going to bring it- what the ball I have- but I knew how you girls would be about it. - signed by Babe Ruth... yep. This is true... I have seen it... like I have seen all of her... she giggles... like I am smoothing you are not.

Yes. Yes. Yes. I do not believe it- You keep telling me that. Who is she? He was a New York Yankee, to do what was never done- and what was that- suck a bass ball bat with no teeth...? Said the girl... funny... I said not giggling. George Herman Ruth Jr. was an American professional baseball player whose career in Major League Baseball spanned 22 seasons, from 1914 through 1935. With the most hits ever...

What?

What?

(Together) Babe Ruth!

The Great Bambino!

Oh, my God! You mean that it is the same guy?

(All) Yes!

It is now 1947 lookup girls there he is sitting in the stands... yes, that one... right there.

Wow, that man?

Girl, Babe Ruth is the greatest softball player that ever played.

That night ended with all the girls getting a hug... and strong wording... of how we are not like him- yet just a little like him in playing the game. I like this one she flashed me... he said. You want to play- nah- that is up to you no- I really cannot.

I had a dream that night about a giant softball...

All the tanks are now signed by Babe Ruth... it was the last game... anyways and now look at this little tank I wore back then... and here is hers... forever a part of our lives.

9

75 years passed-

Yeah, I tried too. I stayed connected with those girls over the years, yet we grew up and apart. I found out that After high school year passed, but as you would get, they all made their own lives. Of course, we all know why boys take over jobs and move on. From a small town- just outside New York. The mouthy girl I never saw again

after that summer. Celia and Ashleigh became an architect, decent work for a woman of the moving past the ways of the 50' and finally making it in the 1960s. The field became, a junkyard- now too small, for modern kids to play in... or so they say, it is not good enough.

Yet, it was never- ever about that- being good enough- it was about fun and the game, kids today not know that... they never see this, they do not want to. My old houses were ripped down- and now has nothing but weeds gowning... in the land lot that it once was. Her home became mini-malls in the 1950s and now looks like a dump- funny that is when you know you lived too long seeing it being built and then ripped down too. Bethany Peffercorn is now married and passed 5 years ago- her kids do not even care to hear the story. They have nine kids a- paces or so- they are brats, that care only about here on little lives.

Shanaya Deshaun became a professional writer- for a newspaper- she was hit by a car in a Walmart parking lot in the year 2014 or something like that. My or my girl never got to the majors, but we dreamed- something kids do not do anymore- and that has a dream. One girl's man- (cannot remember her name...) like- he owns his own business for a while and lost everything- including her, and the coaches a little league team... in Pennsylvania.

I was the last one to move away when the town was shut down and forgotten... and me... the same... all I have is this tank- the black and white photo, and my fading mommies... and like this story to it will be forgotten. That is all I have to say- that is my story... you will not be seeing me again... old age well gets you.

The others are no longer with us... I have the names and dates here... I am the last one on the team as always...

10

Last pitch- I said looking at the photo- saying it weekly- holding the ball- shaking- that brought us together... I will see you for a new game... ha- The Shut Generation.

(You can see the ball on the stone- next to her old friend- were it to fade to nothing- but dust- in the wind like on the softball field. – for she had no one to pass it down to- that took an interest in her ball or story in the new generations- that is why it is here.)

<3

(Jaylynn's story of being ever-so- transfix)

One apron a time there, was once an ironic gentleman whose wife lay sickening, with cancer, and when she felt her finish coming, and portrayal close... she christened- to her only daughter to come near her bed, and said: 'darling teenager, be moral, ethical, honest and virtuous, and God, and the one above, that sing the phrase all the days, will always take care of you, in times of low; and, I will look down upon you from heaven high, and will be with you, till the end of your days.'

Besides, then she fastened her eyes and passed to that place where all they did was sing, and love, unlike this world we all live in. The girl went every single day to her mother's headstone, and cried, and was continuously devout and respectable.

As soon as the wintertime arose, the snowflake, icy, and slush covered the gray stone with a silvery cold feeling, casing with a covering, and when the sunshine originated in the premature spring of flower- blossom, and bud, then melted away, the gentleman he took to himself another companion.

The new companion brought two young teenage descendants' girl's- home with her, besides, they were gorgeous, stunning, attractive, and elegant, in addition to that impartial in attendance, nevertheless, at emotion, core, and hart, were obscure, dark, and horrible, and so-o nasty. Besides, then commenced very wicked, malevolent, spiteful, mean, and evil times, for the unfortunate underprivileged stepdaughter.

'Is the stupid creature to sit in the same room with us?' Said they; 'those who eat food must earn it. She is nothing but a kitchen-house cleaner!' They took away her pretty dresses, and put on her an old gray kirtle, and gave her wooden shoes to wear.

'Just gaze now at the delighted princess, how she so-o decked out!' blubbered they are chuckling, and amusement, and then they directed her into the galley.

Around her she was obliged to do weighty work from morning to night, get up early in the morning, draw water, be the chef for them, make the fires, and wash down, and do all the crab-ie jobs.

As well that, the sisters did their greatest nuisances to her just to get at her- mocking her, in all ways even when she just wants- 'me time' and scattering peas, besides lentils amongst the fragments, also setting her to pick them up.

Trendy in the twilights, when she was moderately exhausted out with her hard day's work, she had no bed to lie on but was appreciative to rest on the family life among the embers.

Above, and beyond, for the reason, that she continuously always looked dusty and dirty, and grubby, and crusty, as if she had slept in the ashes, sanders, and remnants; they named her Jaylynn.

Then it happened, one day that the daddy went to the fair, and he enquired about his two stepdaughters what he ought to fetch back for them. 'Fine outfits!'

'Gems and pieces of jewelry!'

'Nonetheless, what will you have, Jaylynn...?'

'The foremost understand, daddy, that forays in contradiction of your hat on the way home; that is what, I, myself, for one, should- um- like for you to fetch me- like- now.'

So, he bought for the two stepdaughters fine dresses, clothes, garments, and outfits, treasures, and charms, gems, and on his way back, as he rode through a jade lane, a hazel stick collide with against his hat; besides, he penniless it off, and carried it home with him.

Besides, when he reached home, he gave the stepdaughters what they had wished for, and to Jaylynn, he gave the hazel stick.

She thanked him and went to her mother's grave, and established this stick there, weeping so-o, severely, that the sobbing droplets fell upon it and soaked it, and it throve and turned out to be some good strong, up till now, young, tree.

Jaylynn went to see it three times a day and cried and prayed, and each time, a silver birdie ascended from the tree, and if she articulated any wish the birdie carried her of any kind, she had desired, wanted, and longed for...

Here and now, it happened, that the Ruler certain a centenary, that ought to last for three days, and to which all the attractive, lovely, young, sweet, lady teen of that kingdom was bidden, so that the King's young teen-ager child, might choose a bride from among them.

As soon as the five stepdaughters heard that they too were bidden to give the impression, they felt selfsame satisfied, and they baptized Jaylynn, and said, 'Comb our hair, brush our shoes, and make

our buckles fast, we are going to the wedding feast at the King's big French-like castle, that was at the end of a sparkly long village.'

After she heard this, Jaylynn could not help crying, for she too would have liked to go to the ball, and she begged her stepmother to permit her.

'What! You Jaylynn!'

'In all your dust, dirt, and muckiness, you want to go to the jubilee!'

'You, that have no gown, besides no shoes!'

'You want to dance!'

Nevertheless, as she keeps it up in requesting, at last, the stepmother alleged, 'I have strewed a dishful of lentils in the ruins of sanders, and if you can pick them all up o'er in five hours or like- so-o you may go with us.'

Formerly the maiden went to the backdoor, that ran into the orchard, and called out, 'Oh- tender doves, Oh- Oh- turtledoves, and all the birds that be, hear me- the lentils that in ashes lie, arise, and pick up for me! The moral essential be put in the dish, the immoral you may eat if you wish.'

Then there came to the kitchen-window five white doves, and after them some turtledoves, and at last a crowd of all the birds under heaven, chirping and fluttering, and they alighted among the ashes; and the doves nodded with their heads, and began to pick, peck, pick, peck, and then all the others began to pick, peck, pick, peck, and put all the good grains into the dish. Before an hour was over all was done, and they flew away.

Then the earliest brought the dish to her stepmother, feeling elated, and rational, that now she should go to the banquet; but the stepmother said, 'No, Jaylynn, you have no appropriate garments, and you do not know how to dance, and you would be giggled at!'

Besides, when Jaylynn, cried for dissatisfaction, she added, 'If you can pick five dishes full of lentils out of the ruins, nice and clean, you shall go with us:' discerning to herself...

'For that is not likely.'

When she had thrown

five plates full of lentils amongst the ashes the maiden went through the backdoor into the orchard, and wept, the lentils that in ashes lie Come and pick up for me! 'Oh- Oh- calm doves, Oh- turtle-doves, besides all the birds that be, the good must be put in the dish, the bad you may trouble if you demand.'

So, there came to the kitchen-window five white doves, and then some turtledoves, and at last a crowd of all the other birds under heaven, tweeting and panicking, and they alighted among the remains, and the doves nodded with their heads and began to preference, kiss, élite, smooch, and then all the others commenced to choose, kiss, pick, peck, and lay all the good ounces into the plate.

Besides, by that earlier half-an-hour was over, it was all finished, and they flew away. Previously, the earliest took the dishes to the stepmother, feeling thrilled, and thinking that now she should go with them to the dinner; but she said, 'All this is of no good to you; you cannot come with us, for you have no proper dresses, and cannot dance; you would put us to disgrace.' Then she turned her back on poor Jaylynn and made haste to set out with her five proud daughters.

Furthermore, as there was no one left in the house, Jaylynn went to her mother's tombstone, under the hazel lush bush, and cried sobbed, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that shiny and gilded may come down, and cover me.' Then the bird threw down an article of clothing and types of dresses, and a pair of slippers overstated with silk and silver. And in all haste, she put on the dress and went to the celebration.

Nevertheless, her stepmother and sisters did not know her and believed she must be an overseas Princess, she looked so beautiful in her white into a pink dress. Of Jaylynn, they never thought at all, and hypothetical, that she was sitting at home, and picking the lentils out of the vestiges.

The King's son came to meet her and took her by the hand and danced with her, and he rejected to stand up with anybody else so that he might not be obliged to let go her hand, to hold and her to kiss all over; and when anyone came to claim it, he answered, 'She is my lover.'

Moreover, when the evening came, she wanted to go home, but the prince said, he would go with her to make love- and more love in and of her, for he wanted to see where the beautiful girl lived.

Nevertheless, she escaped him and jumped up into the sucker-house. Then the Prince waited until the father came and told him the strange girl had jumped into the sucker-house.

The father thought to himself, 'It surely cannot be Jaylynn,' and called for hatchets, and had the sap house cut down, but there was no one in it.

Above and beyond when they entered the house there sat Jaylynn in her dirty clothes among the cinders, and a little oil lamp burnt dimly in the chimney; for Jaylynn had been very speedy, swift, and had hoped, and skipped out of the dupe house again, and had run to the hazel grasslands; and there she had taken off her lovely dress and had laid it on the grave and was standing in her undergarments, and the bird had carried it away again, and then she had put on her little steely kirtle over, and had sat down in the kitchen among the cinders.

The day next, when the commemoration began once more, and the parents and stepsisters had gone to it, Jaylynn, only age 13, went to the hazel bush and cried, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that silvery and gilded may come down and cover me.'

Then the bird cast down a still more splendid dress than on the day before.

And when she appeared in it among the guests everyone was astonished at her beauty. The prince had been waiting until she came, and he took her hand and danced with her alone. And when anyone else came to invite her, he said, 'She is my partner.' And when the evening came, she wanted to go home, and the prince followed her, for he wanted to see to what house she belonged; but she broke away from him and ran into the garden at the back of the house.

There stood a fine large tree, bearing splendid pears; she leaped as lightly as a squirrel among the branches, and the prince did not know what had become of her.

So, he waited until the father came, and then he told him that the strange maiden had rushed from him and that he thought she had gone up into the pear tree. The father thought to himself, 'It surely cannot be Jaylynn,' and called for an ax, and fell into the tree, but there was no one in it. And when they went into the kitchen there sat Jaylynn among the cinders, as usual, for she had gotten down to the other side of the tree and had taken back her beautiful clothes to the bird on the hazel bush and had put on her old gray kirtle again.

On the third day, when the paternities and the stepchildren had set off, Jaylynn went once more to her mother's grave, and said to

the tree, 'Slight tree, petite tree, shake over me, that silvery and gilded may come down and cover me.' Then the bird cast down a dress, the like of which had never been seen for splendor and brightness, and slippers that were gold.

Besides, when she looked as if in this dress at the feast nobody knew what to say for wonderment. The prince danced with her alone, and if someone else asked her he replied, 'She is my wife and lover.'

Then when it was evening Jaylynn wanted to go home, and the prince was about to go with her, when she ran past him so hurriedly that he could and would not follow her.

But he had laid a plan and had instigated all the steps to be spread with pitch, so-so that as she hurried down them the left shoe of the girl remained penetrating in it.

The prince picked it up and saw that it was gold, and very minor and slim.

The next morning, he went to the father and told him that no one should be his wife-to-be save the one whose foot the golden shoe should fit.

Then the five sisters were glad, because they had pretty feet. The firstborn went to her room to try on the shoe, and her mother stood by.

But then again, she could not get her great toe into it, for the shoe was too small; then her mother handed her a knife, and said, 'Cut the toe off, for when you are Queen you will never have to go on foot.'

So, the girl cut her toe off, enfolded her foot into the shoe, concealed the pain, and went down to the prince. Then he took her with him on his horse as his bride and rode off.

They had to pass by the grave, and there sat the five pigeons on the hazel bush, and cried, 'There they go, there they go! There is blood on her shoe; The shoe is too small, not the right bride at all!'

Then the Prince looked at her shoe and saw the blood flowing. And he twisted his horse round and took the false bride home again, reverbing she was not the right one, and that the other sister must try on the shoe.

So, she went into her room to do so and got her toes comfortably in, but her heel was too large.

Then her mother handed her the knife, saying, 'Cut a piece off your heel; when you are Queen, you will never have to go on foot.' So, the girl cut a piece off her heel, and thrust her foot into the shoe, concealed the discomfort, agony, and went down to the prince, who took his fiancée before him on his horse and rode off, for a night they would never- ever forget, as young lovers should.

When they passed by the hazel bush the five chumps sat there and wept, wishing, and hoping for a man, and a life... like hers.

'There they go, there they go! There is blood on her shoe; The shoe is too small, not the right bride at all!'

Then the Prince looked at her foot and saw how the blood was flowing from the shoe and staining the white stocking. And he turned his horse around and brought the false bride home again. 'This is not the right one,' he said, 'have you no other daughter?'

'Nope,' said the man, 'only my dead wife left behind her a little stunted Jaylynn; it is unbearable,

that she can be a newlywed.'

But then again, the King's son ordered her to be sent for, but the mother said, 'Oh no! she is much too dirty, I could not let her be understood.'

Nonetheless, he would have fetched her, and so Jaylynn had to look as if.

First, she washed her face and hands quite cleanly, and went in and cursed the prince, who held out to her the golden shoe. Then she sat down on a stool, drew her foot out of the heavy wooden shoe, and slipped it into the golden one, which fitted it perfectly.

And when she stood up, and the prince observed in her expression, he knew another time the lovely young girl that had danced with him, and he cried, 'This is the right bride- I love this girl now and always!'

The stepmother and the five sisters were thunderstruck and grew pale with anger, but he put Jaylynn before him on his horse and rode off.

And as they approved the hazel bush, the five white pigeons cried, 'There they go, there they go! No blood on her shoe; The shoe's not too small, the right fiancée, and love maker for is she I all I ever wanted- and more.'

And when they had thus cried, they came flying after and perched on Jaylynn's shoulders, one on the right, the other on the left, and so remained.

And when her marriage to the prince was selected to be held the false sisters came, hoping to curry a favor and to take part in the partying.

So, as the wedding processions went to the church, the eldest walked on the right side and the younger on the left, and the sapping suckers picked out an eye of each of them.

Also, as they refunded the elder was on the left side and the younger one on the right and the chumps picked out the other eye of each of them. Then so-o they were predestined to go blind for the rest of their years, days and loves makings to mind and soul, since of their nonsense and tale, was over.

<3

Interval: 3 Moments that Would not Fade Part: 1

(Kristen's life on Earth)

Films of Kristen Deniel

1

The home was falling apart... anyone could see that, and even from the road, even from the car that I was sitting in with my legs hanging out, the side vent window tilted, I could even see that from the road, anyone could see that all the homes to say it- were all just dumps, sorry- I am not holding back on saying the truth; All the homes were not what you would call fine... nevertheless, that was okay with me it was a home.

Kristen stopped to kiss Gram, and then she was walking toward them, feeling a little shy, but only for a moment, since Noah was pulling Nevaeh- May down the steps, and she could hear him saying, 'It's Kristen, it's my best friend, Kristen,' And there he was with the same mop of dark hair, and those bright blue eyes, and next to him, a girl with the same eyes, and she was smiling too.

And then she saw that Gram was pointing, nodding at her, and smiling. Kristen looked toward the Smiths' house, almost knowing what she was going to see, not believing it could happen, that it was not just Mrs. Meyer waiting at the door. She thought about the cat. Of course, Noah had kept the cat. That meant.

The home was wood in color, just naked standard wood siding- nothing to scream about, yet by the looks of this home, it looks as if someone inside it should be with the lights flickering on and off, like something out of a horror film, or the 1924's. The color and feeling- of that of- starting graying death. And God, look at the door it is just hanging in there on its hinges, like me in a way- like me.

2

Films of Kristen Deniel

Outside it was almost dark. A sliver of moon curved over the Old Man's Mountain, and a lone star was just visible. 'A planet, Kristen,' Green might say. 'Get your astronomy in order.'

If I cried again, the tears would freeze fast on my cheeks.

The snow was so dry I could hear the creaking of my footsteps as I went past the holly bushes. No one could guess they were there, mounded up like soft white pillows, and the river in front of me had disappeared.

I stood still to look at it all. I wondered how I could draw that to show the world underneath: sharp, shiny leaves hidden in the snow, the river running fast and cold under the ice.

In my mind was a picture of Beatrice brushing her hair off her forehead. 'Drawing is a language,' she had said. 'You have to learn to speak it.'

In the distance was the faint sound of a saw: Someone must be cutting wood for a fire. I closed my eyes. Green is and the Old Man turning their heads. Roger saw what they would say. He must be in the apple orchard, or Hopper has finally gotten to that dead elm.

No, it was not a saw. It was the sound of a snowmobile, on the other side of the mountain.

A clump of snow fell off the roof of the house. I looked back at it, at the house where I wanted to belong. Huge icicles hung from the eaves, and suddenly I was so cold I could not stay outside anymore. Upstairs in my bedroom, I sat at the edge of the bed

shivering, waiting until I was warm; then I went to my backpack and pulled out my films to spread across the bumpy white bedspread.

I saw how much blue I had used in those summer drawings: blue for the river, blue for the Old Man's rugs, blue for Izzy's locket; and green: a smudge of the tree, a leaf, the edge of the mountain. Both colors I loved.

The films I had drawn of Gram lay in the middle of the bed.

Gram on the pier, reaching for seagrass; Gram outside in her tree garden, shades of peach and lilac; Gram happy, Gram where she belonged.

Gram did not belong here. She belonged in her house with Beatrice, and Henry, and the irritable pelican on her wall.

She belonged near the ocean.

I sat there for a long time, my head against the headboard, knowing what I had to do. I rubbed my hands, still icy cold. It was four miles to the telephone outside the grocery store, a long walk, but I could do it. I would call Beatrice... ask her, beg her.

We would go home, Gram and I, Gram to Beatrice, me to another place. I looked at a half-finished picture of Izzy at the cemetery with a vase of daisies in her hand. What had she said that day? 'I wanted children for every corner of the house.' And what else? There was something more she had said, something about Green is and the Old Man. 'It's worse this summer.'

I would have to stop thinking about Izzy, put all of them out of my mind. Before I left, I would get rid of all the films of them, burn the drawings in the fireplace. I would forget about Izzy and the Old Man, forget about Green's.

I stared down at the drawing of Izzy backing out of the door with my WELCOME TO THE FAMILY cake and saw something I had not remembered: The Old Man's hand on Greens' shoulder.

Me, catching my first fish. Green is in front of me with the net, the Old Man smiling. But he is looking at Green, not at me.

Looking and smiling.

And another: Green is hanging into the engine of a car, just the back of him visible, with mismatched socks, and the Old Man with his hands on his hips, but his eyes are soft.

Beatrice was in my head again. What had she said to me one time? ‘Sometimes we learn from our drawings; things are there that we thought we didn’t know.’

My lips were suddenly dry.

I stood up, walked around to the other side of the bed. There they were in the boat. Green’s laughing at something the Old Man had said.

How had I drawn all that and not seen it?

Of course, the Old Man loved Green’s. He was going to love him whether I was there or not. Had I given them up for nothing, the whole family?

What do you know about a family? Green is said in my mind. You have never had one.

I remembered what Izzy had said then: ‘They have to find their way.’

I picked up another picture: me with candy in my mouth. Then there was something else floating just on the edge of my mind. Something to do with the radio? Why the radio?

Wait, I told myself. What had Gram said about wanting Santa to bring a radio?

And then I had it. The two of us were joking. ‘Santa on a sleigh,’ I had said.

‘That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on...’

...A snowmobile? To bring the candy? Green’s? The pancakes, and the applesauce?

I slid off the bed, the picture drifting out of my hand, my knuckles up to my mouth.

The sweater hanging on the shed doorknob.

Holly on the back step. ‘Peace, Kristen.’

I felt as if I could hardly breathe.

And then I was flying down the stairs, my feet barely touching the steps, skittering on the Old Man's shiny floor, coming to a stop in front of Gram asleep on the couch.

I sat down next to her, one hand on Henry's rough fur.

'Wake up, Gram,' I said. 'I want to ask you about Santa Claus.' Films of Kristen Deniel Gram slept through my questions, her head nestled on the couch cushions, and Henry with her, purring faintly with his eyes closed. She slept as I shook her, slept as I begged her, 'Please, Gram, I cannot wait to know,' slept as I offered her soup from a can, Izzy's candy, a cup of tea.

Then, at last, I gave up. I looked at the black square that was the window. The moon had disappeared behind the Old Man's Mountain, and the star was gone.

I went into the kitchen to make something to eat: the rest of the tuna with canned pineapple thrown on top, and a few frosted flakes for crunch. I ate it at the kitchen counter, wolfing it down, made hot chocolate, and when it had cooled a little, put it under Gram's nose. 'Smells good, doesn't it? Just open your eyes, take a sip, and talk to me.'

She smiled in her sleep as I kissed her forehead, and then I went upstairs to bed, lying awake for a long time, feeling the tick of my heart in my throat.

The holly had just blown onto the back step. Gram had found the candy in the house. Maybe. Maybe.

But then as I fell asleep, I could almost hear his voice in my head. Merry Christmas, Kristen Copses.

I was awake in the first light the next morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunshine melting the ice on the window. I went downstairs and Gram was still asleep on the couch, but Henry was awake, stretching his skinny legs. I let him out and stood in the doorway, hugging myself, squinting at that glittering world, listening to the sawing sound of a snowmobile.

And then Gram opened her eyes.

I began slowly. 'Christmas was yesterday,' I said.

She smiled at me.

'Santa Claus is coming...' I sang.

‘...To town,’ she finished.

‘He came to us,’ I said.

‘In all this snow,’ she said.

‘But what did he look like?’

She ran her hand over her face, thinking. ‘He looked cold,’ she said.

‘And he gave you the candy.’

‘One time,’ she said, ‘when Beatrice and I were little, he brought mittens. Red for Beatrice, blue for me. We each swapped one. All winter, we wore one blue and one red.’

I went over to her and touched her hair. ‘I’m going to call Beatrice,’ I said.

‘Are we going home?’ She asked.

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘I think so. Can you wait here? It is a long walk to the phone. I will be gone most of the morning.’

I heard a few fragments of the song as she wandered into the kitchen. ‘If it takes forever, I will wait...’

I made breakfast for both of us, a heap of frosted flakes; then I layered sweaters, three pairs of Greens’ socks, my jacket, and turned to Gram for one last try. ‘Where did you get the candy?’ I asked.

‘It’s in a tin box,’ she said. ‘Orange and lemon. Makes your mouth wiggle.’

‘I’ll be back.’ I opened the door, hearing the drip of melting icicles from the roof, and stepped back as Henry darted inside.

Outside I thought at first of taking the road. What difference would it make if I were caught?

But it would make a difference. I wanted to call Beatrice first. I wanted to hear that she had come to live with Gram.

And suppose she does not? Green is asked.

I shook my head. She will. I think she will.

I brushed him away, trudging along through the trees, listening to the call of the crows, the screech of the blue jays. And all the time I was listening to that buzzing sound of the snowmobile, telling myself I had made the whole thing up, telling myself it was not Green's.

And what if it was Green's? I asked myself. What would I say to him?

It must have been twenty minutes later when I heard the faint sound of the motor. It could have been anyone, but still, I ran toward the road, trying to pick up my feet in that deep snow.

I saw him, a helmet on his head, thick gloves on his hands, bent over the handles of the snowmobile, and I stepped out onto the road just in time for him to see me and glide to a stop.

I stood there, biting my lip, feeling that river of tears coming, at last, waiting for that brief second as he pushed up the visor. 'Kristen Copses,' he said. 'Where are you going?'

'Green's Regan,' I said, my mouth trembling. 'Happy birthday.'

And then we were laughing, both of us, laughing instead of crying.

'Thank you for the candy,' I said, at last, looking at his face, thinner, bonier. Something about his eyes seemed older.

'Horrible stuff, that candy,' he said.

'And the holly branch.'

He tilted his head a little. 'Kristen Copses,' he said again.

'How did you know I was here?'

He raised one shoulder. 'There was a letter from the agency looking for you.'

I nodded, thinking about the hot cocoa woman sending lost girl letters to every house I had ever been in.

'I told Pop.' Green is swiped at his glasses. '"Kristen loves that house,' I said. But did he listen? Of course not.'

I swallowed. 'You and the Old Man are still arguing.'

‘If she loved that house so much, she would be with us right now,’ Pop said. But I knew. I have been here every day except during the massive storm.’

I was shivering in the cold, the wind blowing around us, my feet beginning to feel numb.

‘We’ve been hoping you’d come home all these months,’ he said. ‘Why not, Holly?’

And then I was crying, big sloppy tears. I leaned against the handlebars, making terrible sounds in my throat, and I just could not seem to stop.

Green stood there, his hands dangling in those huge gloves, and then he reached out, put his arms around me, pulling me toward him.

‘The Old Man went down to Long Island when he heard you were missing,’ he said. ‘He’s going crazy looking for you. He keeps going back and forth.’

‘Why didn’t you tell him?’

‘I wanted to do that for you, at least that. Give you time.’ He paused. ‘You’re famous. Your picture is in the newspaper. An awful-looking picture if you ask me.’

As he rattled on, I kept sniffing and wiping my eyes, and then I would start to cry again.

‘I knew you’d be safe.’ He took one arm off my shoulder to wave it around. ‘As long as I kept an eye on you and your friend.’

‘You have a nerve,’ I said.

‘You’d have starved to death without the food I brought.’

He frowned and began again. ‘I still don’t know why...’

‘I thought...’ I began and bit my lip. I would never tell him what I had thought about the Old Man not loving him. ‘You were always arguing, and I thought it had to do with...’ I waved my hands.

‘With you?’ he said. ‘Oh, Holly. It does not have to do with anyone. I told you that. It is just the way we are.’

I stared down the road, not a car in sight, the trees heavy with snow, bent and leaning.

‘I am a slob, and he is neat. I forget, he remembers. We drive each other crazy. But it is all right.’

I ran my hands over my cheeks, tried to dry them. As simple as that, just the way they were.

‘I told you,’ He said, his head tilted, his eyes smiling. ‘You don’t know about families yet.’ He leaned back against the snowmobile. ‘He knew the accident was my fault.’

I sighed. ‘It was my fault.’

‘Everything has to be your fault all the time?’

I shrugged a little. ‘After the accident, Pop said they had told him you never stayed in one place exceptionally long. But he said we were different, and that it must be something else. And that is what it was? You thought-’

‘I messed up the family.’ ‘Wait till he hears this,’ Green said. ‘Just wait.’

I watched the snow drifting off the trees. Old Man, I love you. Green rubbed my shoulders; he must have seen that I was shivering. ‘I put the fishing pole away for you in the shed and looped the sweater over the knob.’

‘The fishing poles?’ My hand went to my mouth. ‘I forgot about the fishing pole. All this time.’

‘Ha, Kristen Copses, there’s hope for you, I told you that. I am going to spend next summer fixing up the old truck. What do you say? Want to help? Want to come home?’

I did not say anything. I did not have to. I climbed up on the back of the snowmobile. ‘Take me to the telephone booth down at the grocery,’ I said.

He gunned the motor and the snow spewed out behind us as we flew up the highway to call Beatrice.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Green stood next to me in that freezing phone booth, his eyeglasses steamy and small puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth.

He talked the whole time. 'I told Izzy not to worry, that you'd be home by Christmas.' He wagged his eyebrows. 'Of course, I knew where you were.'

'Wait,' I said, dialing the number I had memorized all those weeks ago. 'I can't hear.'

'And the day after Christmas is pretty close.' He grinned at me.

Then Beatrice's sweet voice was in my ear, soft and a little breathless.

'It's me,' I said. 'Kristen Copses.'

For a moment she did not answer. When she began to speak, it seemed as if she could not stop. 'I've been calling for days, Kristen,' she said. 'Where are you? Is Gram all right? Do you know where Gram is? Please know. I have been so worried.' She paused, out of breath now.

I closed my eyes: Beatrice worried, Gram unhappy, the Old Man looking for me. What had I done?

'She's with me,' I said.

Greens' voice was still in my head even though he was standing right next to me. If you had not made that mess, you might never have come home.

'Gram wants to come home. She remembers home, but she forgets so much else,' I told Beatrice. 'The agency is not going to let her stay there alone. And they want me to go somewhere else.'

'I am coming home, Kristen. I am coming home right now.'

Do not worry. I will move right in with Gram.' Her voice sounded excited. 'I am already sick of painting the desert. I need some snow in my life. I need to see Gram and Henry.'

Green clapped his hands together for warmth. 'We started in your room anyway,' he said. 'I told the Old Man we'd paint it green, green for holly.'

'Beatrice, she'll be so glad to see you,' I said, looking at Green, listening to them both at once.

'But the Old Man wanted your room blue,' Green is said.

“‘Kristen loves blue,’ he kept telling us. What does he know?

French Blue, he calls it.’

Films of Kristen Deniel

‘My cousin Beatrice would love this,’ Gram said, looking around the room. ‘If only...’

I had never seen anything so beautiful, so Christmassy either. Pine Laurel Highlands were everywhere. We had found candles, a dozen, and lit all of them. The ornaments sparkled in the light. And then I thought of what Gram had begun to say. ‘If only what?’ I asked.

She shrugged a little. ‘Beatrice and I spent every Christmas together. She remembers things for me when I forget, things about when we were young.’ Her forehead wrinkled. ‘Fishing off the jetties.’

I felt a lump in my throat. ‘She’ll be home someday,’ I said, but I wondered when that would be.

‘Next year?’ Gram said.

I looked out the window. I did not like to think about it next year. Where would we be then?

‘Just a minute,’ I told her. ‘Close your eyes.’

I went down the hall for the picture I had drawn and laid it on the table to flicker in the candlelight. ‘Gram herself,’ I said, ‘with Beatrice.’

She drew in her breath, leaning over it, running one finger along the edge. ‘We’re young.’ She smiled at me. ‘And look at that popcorn machine.’ Head tilted; she spotted Henry batting a piece of popcorn across the floor. ‘You have to keep looking to see everything,’ she said.

She stood up then and patterned away from me into the kitchen. She came back with a round tin in her hand. ‘This is from Santa Claus.’

I touched the tin. ‘Where did you find this?’

Izzy’s hard candies: Izzy standing on the porch one sunny afternoon, holding a tin out to me. ‘Lemon drops, and oranges. They

will make you sweat, make you love.' She had leaned forward to touch my shoulder.

'You always lump one cheek,' Green told me days later as I worked my way through the candy. 'It's going to freeze like that.'

Oh, Izzy. Oh, Green's.

I opened the tin and held it out to Gram. 'You get first to pick.' Another thing I had to pay back. I could not just take Izzy's candies.

'Take them,' I suddenly remembered Izzy saying with a sweep of her arm. 'Take anything, Kristen. I have always wanted a daughter.'

'I have a real present for you,' Gram said around the candy in her mouth.

I looked after her, wondering, as she went into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom and came back with something in her arms.

'She's finished at last.'

It was my tree figure, with her sea-grass hair cascading down her back, half the size of Gram. She looked older than I was, but as I touched her face, the small nose, the large eyes, the tiny scar on the forehead, the arms out, I could see it was me.

But not me.

I looked closer, studying those eyes that were so sad it hurt to look at them, and ran my fingers over those outstretched arms.

'Giving arms,' Gram said, nodding, bone-thin, like one of the little birds that perched on the evergreen trees. I reached out to her, feeling those small shoulders, and hugged her to me.

Tears burned my eyes. 'She's beautiful,' I said.

'Do you think she looks like you?'

I held her out. 'She's not as tough,' I said, trying for a smile. 'She doesn't look like a mountain of trouble.'

Gram shook her head. 'You're tough when you need to be tough. But trouble? What would I ever have done without you?'

Gram put her hand under my chin and tilted it so that I had to look at her. 'I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.'

'But I am not-' I began, but she broke in.

'Not good? Not kind? Not there when you are needed?

Not anxious to be loved? You know that is not so.'

I did cry then, but just for a moment. If I had let myself go, I would have had a tough time stopping.

-And-

Then I saw that Gram was crying too.

'I know you want to go home,' I said, a jumble of thoughts in my mind. I wanted to say that we could be a family here, but she wanted to be in her own house, wanted to make Christmas cookies with Beatrice, and spend Tuesdays and Thursdays at the movies making popcorn.

We sat on the couch, Henry on Gram's lap, watching the candles glow in the late-afternoon light. The fire in the fireplace sent warm shadows over the wood floor and the walls, and next to me Gram was closing her eyes. Her head went back to rest against the couch, and she was asleep.

I sat there too, half dozing, remembering that Greens' birthday was the next day. It hurts to think about it. I stood up slowly, quietly, and went into his room. I picked up the blurry picture from his dresser, half of the photo dark, the rest all blue and green, with the faint figure in the center. It was the river, of course; I saw it then, with the holly bushes on the bank and just the faintest view of the Old Man's Mountain reaching up in the back. There was a rowboat, and I was in it. I rolled a huge piece of wood onto the banked fire, thinking I would have to drag more in from the porch later.

Henry looked up at me, meowing, waiting to go out. I reached for the knob, pulling, and when the door opened, a gust of wind blew a swirl of snow inside. Henry stared at me angrily.

'Not my fault,' I told him, pushing the door closed again.

He went back to the couch, skinny tail twitching.

'Sorry, cat.' I ran my hand over the top of his head as I went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets.

Ah, how far away the hot cocoa woman was, locked in her house somewhere. How far away everyone was.

I thought of the Old Man, and Green's, and Izzy. They were just a few miles away, but those few miles were forever. Did Green like the snow, or were they so used to storms like this that they never paid attention to them? I wondered if they ever thought about me the way I did about them. I wondered how Green was now.

I could hear the Old Man's voice in my ears. I closed my eyes. Do not think of that, do not ever think of that terrible afternoon again.

I took out the box of cocoa with marshmallows and boiled a pot of water on the stove, thinking of what I would do today. Draw in front of that big window, I told myself. Figure out a way to shade in that soft line of trees, the gray ribbon of river. Charcoal would be wonderful for that; I would even be able to use a chunk of burned wood from the fireplace.

I had done other films in the past few days and taped them up around the living room: a snowshoe rabbit with his tall ears, four deer nibbling at the bark of the evergreen, the bridge covered in clear ice. I had done a few of Gram in the snow too, almost nothing but a few quick lines. She walked every day, down to the road, around the evergreens, coming back with her scarf blowing around her face.

What would happen if I left those films when we had to leave next spring? What would the Old Man say when he found them?

What would Izzy say? And Green's?

Spring. Could I call Beatrice then? She would have had months. What would happen to me?

Who cared? I would think of something. But I would never leave the films. I would take them with me in my backpack.

Sitting at the table, waiting for the cocoa to cool, I thought about Christmas. I had lost track of the days. I flipped Izzy's wall calendar ahead to December, trying to figure it out. How long had we been here? Eight days? Nine? I counted back.

The water was ready. I mixed the cocoa and took a tiny sip, feeling the heat of it, the steam on my upper lip. Today could be Christmas Eve.

I stood there planning. When the snow stopped, I would get myself outside and take some of the Evergreen Laurel Highlands; there were so many trees we could fill rooms with them. We would trim the mantle with great heaps of green and tuck Gram's ornaments among the needles. We would find a few pinecones too. We will have a special dinner tomorrow night. Fruit cocktail and canned tuna, a feast. And popcorn.

I wished I had a present for Gram. The only thing I could give her was a picture of herself. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I would do that today instead of drawing trees. I took another sip of cocoa. What about Gram with Beatrice at the movies in front of their popcorn machine? Both would be eating, mouths full, arm in arm, smiling.

'Sleigh bells ring,' Gram sang, coming into the kitchen behind me.

'I was just thinking that.' I reached for another cup and poured in water for cocoa.

She stopped to peer out the window. 'I've watched it snow on the ocean,' she said. 'It melts as it hits the water.' She touched the glass with all five fingers. 'There is nothing like the ocean.'

I tried to think of something to change the look in her eyes.

'I was thinking we'd have a party,' I told her, 'With your ornaments and tree Laurel Highlands from outside.'

She smiled, looking up at the ceiling. 'We could listen to carols on the radio,' she said. 'That's what Beatrice and I do every year—that and talk about when we were young. Where is Beatrice?'

'Painting,' I said. 'It's warm where she is.'

Gram shook her head. 'We always make almond cookies; we eat half and sell the other half at the movie.'

'It would be nice if we had a radio.' I popped two of our last pieces of bread into the toaster. 'And too bad we don't have a few eggs around.'

'Or almond syrup,' she said.

'Or better,' I said, and we both laughed.

‘We’d have to ask Santa Claus,’ she said. ‘He’d bring it all to us on his...’ She paused, thinking.

‘Sleigh.’

She shook her head. ‘That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a...’ She looked up at the ceiling.

I laughed. ‘A motorbike?’

‘One of those snow things.’ She nodded, laughing too.

‘But how could we not have a radio? Everyone has a radio.’

I finished off my coco, one sweet marshmallow left in my mouth, trying to remember. Has there been a radio here? There was never television, I remember that. But Gram was right, there must be a radio. I wandered around, searching, and finally found one on a shelf, behind boxes of old jigsaw puzzles, the old cord wrapped around it. All that time Henry was stalking me, a line between his eyes as if he were frowning. He wanted to go out.

I went to the door again and cracked it. The snow was worse now, much worse. The line of trees had disappeared, and even the shed seemed far away. I was almost afraid to let Henry out. Before I could shut the door again, though, he darted around me and was gone. I stood there, shivering, trying to see where he was, and then he was back, streaking through the door straight across the living room, into the kitchen, and onto Gram’s lap.

I set up my drawing things in front of the window, beginning the rough lines that would turn into Gram. Gram was there on the other side of the room, at the table, fiddling with the radio knob until she found a station with Christmas music.

The announcer’s voice: ‘A lovely Christmas Eve morning.’

I had hit the date straight on the head.

The songs began, one after another: ‘Adeste Fidelis,’ ‘Silent Night,’ ‘Winter Wonderland,’ and one I had never heard before: ‘Gather ‘Round the Christmas Tree.’

I leaned over the paper in front of me so Gram would not see what I was doing. I sketched in the space around Beatrice first, the counter, the popcorn machine, and then began to work on the faces. Every few minutes I would peer out at the snow coming down. Across

the river the mountain was blurred, just a dark shadow rising into the pewter sky.

And then I thought about Gram sitting there, my figure in her hand, staring out the window too as she listened to the music, her face tilted, her eyes sad.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never really drew any of this. I tried not to think about it. It kept coming up inside my head, though, picture after picture of what happened that last day. Saturday. Izzy and the Old Man off on some antique hunt up to Masonville. Green's begging me to go fishing. 'We'll take the boat all the way down to the rapids,' he said. 'Bring our lunch.'

'You go,' I said, barely looking up from my drawing.

'Going to spend this entire day with a bunch of pencils in your mouth? Fooling around with bits of paper?'

I grinned at him over my shoulder.

Go, Green is, I thought. Get out of here.

And then he went with a great clatter, pail and oars, pole and lures, a sandwich dripping tomatoes outside the side. 'You'll probably be sorry in two minutes,' he said.

He sounded sorry. 'Do you mind?' I asked.

He grinned. 'Not really. But I will be gone all day, I warn you.'

He climbed into the rowboat, and I watched him, his back bent, leaning over the oars until he was gone.

I put everything away carefully, my pad and pencils, cleaned up the tomato mess in the kitchen, put away the box of Mallomars, shut the refrigerator door, and all the time I was thinking, Three hours up, three hours back, a cinch.

I grabbed a sweater just in case it was getting cold now-and at the last minute, I changed my mind and took a few pieces of paper folded in my pocket, a few pencils: green, gray, brown, and black, and the French Blue one. Who knew what I could use it for, but it was my favorite?

And then I began to climb. It was hot work; I draped the sweater over a tree limb. After a while, I could feel the pull in my ankles, the rub of my sneakers against my heels. I stopped at the halfway point to look down at the house, the snake of the river, and I could see Green is a tiny figure in the rowboat.

I pulled out some paper, made a quick sketch, and climbed some more. Mud. The Old Man was right: It was deceptive. I could not tell it was there until I stepped into it, once covering the whole of my sneaker. I pulled the shoe out and wiped it off with a few leaves.

I was out of breath by the time I almost reached the top, and hungry. Why hadn't I made my tomato sandwich? There was water, though, a tiny thread of it trickling down from one of the rocks, and I leaned my face into it and drank, and put my wrists under it, and then took the last few steps and I was there.

It opened out, a wide piece of rock, and I danced out onto it, catching my breath. I had brought dark pencils, but this was a light world. I could see toy houses, and the river, and even the town of Hancock in the distance. There was a tiny silver lake and a road with miniature cars. 'It's Christmas!' I shouted.

I said all the things I wanted to. 'I'm new,' I said. 'I'm different.'

And in my head, I told myself I would never be mean again, I would be friendly, I would go to school and walk up to people. 'A new leaf,' I said.

I was twirling, dizzy, hungry, and the bubbles inside twirled with me until I took one step too close to the edge in that muddy sneaker, and then I was rolling, feeling the sharp edge of a branch tearing into my arm and a stone gashing into my forehead, and finally, a huge boulder stopped me a few feet down. The wind had been knocked out of me. I lay gasping.

I pulled myself back up. Not so bad, not so terrible, I told myself, wiping the blood out of my eye, except that I knew I would never be able to walk down by myself.

I did not begin to call Green is until much later until the sun had crossed toward the west and I knew it was late afternoon, and I did not want Izzy and the Old Man to know I had done such a stupid thing. And even as I called, I knew Green could not hear me.

But he came, of course, he came. Just before sunset I heard him, or I heard the pickup truck, gears grinding and then stopping, the door slamming, and then he was standing over me.

‘I knew it,’ he said.

‘How?’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘Break any bones?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘I wasted my whole afternoon,’ he said. ‘Felt sorry that you were all alone, came back, and-’

‘Wasted-’

‘Right. I figured it out, though. You were not anywhere.’

‘So, why’d you bring the truck?’ I asked.

‘Think I had three hours before dark to walk up here to get you?’ He shook his head. ‘I thought you’d been killed.’

‘Just wounded,’ I said, laughing.

We sat on the edge of the rock, watching the sun go down.

Green is pointed. ‘Our winter place is somewhere over there. You will see it soon.’ To the east far below was the summer house, the holly bushes a blur of green, the golden field, the thread of the river. It took my breath away.

‘I want to show you something,’ I told Green’s. I reached into my pocket for the crumpled-up W picture I had taken out of my backpack before I had left. ‘I’ve had it since I was six.’

We sat on a ledge, our feet dangling, and he smoothed the picture on his knee, stared at it, then looked over at me.

‘We had to find films with W words,’ I said.

‘It’s a wishing picture,’ he said slowly, ‘for a family.’

I could feel my lips trembling. Oh, Mrs. Evans, I thought, why didn’t you see that?

‘It’s too bad you didn’t come when you were six.’ He smiled. ‘I knew you had to stay with us when you let me win that checkers game.’

His hair was falling over his forehead and his glasses were crooked, almost hiding his eyes. I thought of the X-picture day and walking out of school. I thought of sitting in the park on a swing, my foot digging into the dirt underneath.

‘I run away sometimes,’ I said. ‘I don’t go to school.’

He kicked his foot gently against the ledge, his socks down over his sneakers.

‘Someone called me incorrigible.’

Now that I had begun, I did not know how to stop. ‘Kids never wanted to play with me. I was mean....’

Green has pulled his glasses off and set them down on the ledge next to him. He rubbed the deep red mark on the bridge of his nose.

I stopped, looking out as far as I could, miles of looking out. For a moment I was sorry I had told him. But he turned and I could see his eyes and I wondered if he might be blinking back tears. I was not sure, though. He reached out and took my hand.

‘You ran in the right direction this time, didn’t you?’

And that was it. He knew all about me, and he did not mind.

‘We have to go down now,’ he said, ‘before they come back and find out.’

I nodded. I stood up, and I could feel the pain shoot through my ankle. I limped to the pickup truck. ‘I’m glad you came,’ I said. ‘I could never have walked down.’ ‘It was a dumb thing to do,’ he said, ‘coming up here. Pop would have a fit.’

And so, we went down. Green is a sure and careful driver, but it was so steep, and the truck kept going, kept sliding, even with the brake pressed down as hard as he could manage. He pressed and pressed, but the truck gained speed, and just before the end when we would have been all right when we would have been fine, the truck tipped, and I could see we were going to go over.

And Green is yelling at me. 'Jump, Holly!'

Films of Kristen Deniel

Later that afternoon the snow tapered off and stopped. I took a last look at the picture, pleased with it: Beatrice, listening to something Gram is saying, both with bags of popcorn in their hands. I sneaked it into my room so that Gram would not see it.

I put on all the clothes I could find, and Izzy's boots, and went outside to sink into the soft snow to my knees. The cold was shocking. It stung the inside of my nose and numbed my cheeks.

Everything was still. The birds must have found nesting places for the night, and the deer were hiding somewhere deep in the Copses. The last slim line of the river had frozen; if I had not known it was there, I would have walked right across to the other side. I wondered if the ice would carry my weight yet.

I realized I would not be able to pick evergreen or holly Laurel Highlands from the ground. Anything the wind had brought down was under the snow. I would have to see off what I could.

Gram and Henry were framed in the window, waving to me. I reached down to scoop up a handful of white and tossed it at them. Then I trudged over to the shed for the Old Man's saw and found Greens' sweater hanging on the knob, encrusted with snow. I did not even remember leaving it there. I folded it, put it on one of the shelves, reached for the saw, and spent the last bit of daylight hacking away at Laurel Highlands, making sure not to spoil the shapes of the trees.

The wind was not as strong under the shelter of those trees, and it reminded me of something the Old Man had told me.

Hunters who were lost would pull the Laurel Highlands tree together with rope, bending them to form a shelter. I loved the thought of that, the trees forming a cozy nest. And then I shivered, thinking of being alone.

You have Gram, Green might have said.

I love Gram, I said back.

From inside, music spilled from the radio. 'All I want for Christmas...'

What I want. What I want.

Gram was turning on the lamps now; the house was like a Christmas card with the light shining on the snow. I stood there watching, wondering how far the light might be seen.

I reached up for the last branch, snow spraying my face. No one could understand something at last anyway, I told myself; it faced the river, away from the road, and no one would be on the Old Man's Mountain toward evening after a storm like this.

'You're a snow sculpture,' Gram said as I trudged onto the porch, staggering under the milky Laurel Highlands.

I pulled off Izzy's waders and rubbed my feet until the feeling came back. Gram danced around me. 'I have something for your dinner,' she said, delighted with herself. 'I was saving it for a surprise.'

She led me into the kitchen and opened the cabinet over the refrigerator. I thought I knew where everything was, but behind Izzy's old bowls and mixers was a row of treasures: a box of dried milk... milk!... pancake mix, and a jar of applesauce. 'Yes,' Gram said with satisfaction. 'We'll have apple pancakes for dinner with cold milk.'

My mouth watered. A Christmas Eve dinner.

I will pay you back, Izzy, every cent, if it takes me the rest of my life.

So, Gram cooked for the first time, talking to me over her shoulder about Beatrice. 'Ornaments sparkle on the tree, and

Beatrice lights the candles.'

Every time Gram talked about Beatrice, she came alive, I thought; Beatrice and her house. I knew she was homesick. 'We'll have Christmas here too,' I told her. 'I'll set everything up after we eat.'

But after I had finished the pancakes covered with dollops of sweet applesauce, my eyes drooped; I was warm and sleepy.

'Let us do it all in the morning,' I said.

'Presents,' Gram said, a secret smile lighting her face. I curled up in bed, looking out the window at a pale moon and trees thick with snow, thinking I had never seen anything so beautiful. I could see movement at the edge of the trees and sat up to see what it was. And

then suddenly, a fox, silvery gray with his tail streaming out behind him, darted across that open space, crossed the ice, and was gone.

I saw a fox, Green's. I have never seen a fox before.

I lay back, trying to figure out what Gram might have for me. She had found another package of food. I fell asleep wondering what it was, what I would like it to be: something sweet, something chocolate, or salty. Potato chips.

The next morning, the sun was blinding. And the shed glittered like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel. I lay there, something on the edge of my mind. What was it? Something about the shed? Or was I wondering what the Old Man would think if he knew I was spending Christmas in his house?

I did not want to think about that. But there was something else. Was it Gram's present for me? An egg was what I wanted this morning. What could I do with an egg! I would bake a cake or cookies. I would whip it up for eggnog. I would fry it like a little sun in a pan.

I threw on my clothes. The house still smelled of the pancakes from last night. I went into the kitchen.

At that moment the back door opened, and Gram came in, her scarf pulled over her forehead, her nose red.

I wanted to tell her she should not be out there, that it was too cold, the snow too deep. But I would sound like the stucco woman. I turned back to the stove. 'Coco with milk,' I said.

We hurried through breakfast, and afterward, I went out on the porch to shake the snow off the Laurel Highlands before I brought them inside. I covered the mantelpiece, the sharp pine smelling like Christmas, as Gram unwrapped the box of ornaments. 'Here's my old Santa Claus.' I could hear the tears in her voice as she hung him in the center. 'And this one.' She held up a thick pink plastic globe. 'Ugly, isn't it? It is the only kind we could get during the Second World War.'

She went on, telling me the history of each one until the mantel was finished and the center of the table held a bowl of holly. 'We'll even hang a few of those glittery ornaments over the window to catch the light,' I said aloud, and to myself, please be happy, Gram.

'Presents now?' Gram asked.

'Maybe,' I said absently. I had caught movement outside as I hung the last clear prism.

We watched as seven or eight deer wandered in front of the house, making their way toward the evergreens. Suddenly something disturbed them. Heads back, noses up, they stood stock-still for an instant, then scattered, two to bound across the river ice as the fox had last night, the others in the opposite direction, toward the bridge.

I tried to see what had bothered them. I looked toward the evergreens myself, looked back as far as I could. There was no light anywhere, nothing to make me think about a fisher being out there somewhere.

I had a quick thought of the night on the mountain with the flashlights like glow worms above me.

It was then I remembered: Green's sweater, a flash of green in the snow as I backed away from the fisher that day. I had not left it on the doorknob in the shed. I opened my mouth to ask Gram if she had picked it up when she had been outside. But Gram would never remember. I did not want to know the answer, anyway, thinking of the fisher finding us and what might happen then.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I could not get warm, even though I wore a robe and Izzy's sweater on top of that. Every time I drifted off to sleep that August night, I would start, thinking someone was there. I would look around the darkroom, but it was empty. I would close my eyes again, and then I would think I was falling, my head jerking, arms up, legs braced, a scream in my throat, and that feeling in my chest as we went over the side.

But I did not sleep. I kept going over it: the sound first, a screeching metal, tearing, as if the truck were dying, the wheel swerving, a tree slowing us down, its Laurel Highlands cracking, breaking, leaves covering the windshield, a rock ripping at the underside, the truck bouncing now, not so muddy, gravel and roots and Green's hands off the wheel, the sound of glass shattering, a tire spinning...

And then everything was still.

We were down the Old Man's Mountain, and next to me Green is with his head on the wheel. I reached for him, my heart pounding, shook his shoulder. 'Don't do this,

Green's,' I said. 'Don't be dead.'

I pushed him back, his head against the seat now, his face white in the dusky inside of the truck. Not a mark on him that I could see, but he was hurt, I was sure, really hurt. He was not dead, though. There was a thin pulsing on the side of his neck, his eyes moving under the broken glasses. I took them off gently and heard him say something. Loon Sister. I could hear the S. It was Sorry.

‘Green’s, I have to get help.’ I watched him for another moment, then scrambled out of the truck, feeling the pull of my ankle, telling myself I had to do it, had to go as quickly as I could. I began the climb back up, wondering how long it would take to get down the mountain road, cross the bridge, and reach the house.

And then I thought, No telephone.

What then?

I was there when I saw the sweep of headlights going across the bridge. Izzy and the Old Man coming home?

When they saw me, Izzy leaned out the window, calling, ‘I bought dishes, Kristen. You are going to love them.’ And then she stopped. ‘Child, you’re bleeding.’

‘The truck!’ I spoke.

‘What has he done?’ the Old Man said. ‘What has he done now? You can hardly walk!’

It seemed to take forever before lights flickered on the mountain and cars began to park diagonally down below. Turret lights turned and glowed, and an ambulance came from Walton, its siren screaming. They brought Green down at last, but all I could see was one foot, the sneaker, the socks falling over his ankles.

A police officer shook his head, talking to Izzy and the Old Man as I stood to one side, out of everyone’s way. ‘If it were not your mountain, if it were not private property, your boy would be in trouble. As it is-’

‘As it is,’ Izzy’s voice cut in, ‘we have to hope he’ll be all right.’

And I looked over my shoulder at the Old Man’s face, his clenched jaw.

In the emergency room, a doctor took five stitches to close my forehead and wrapped an Ace bandage around my ankle.

Green had been somewhere inside too, and I did not even know what was happening to him.

We went home later that night, much later, Izzy and I, Izzy stayed just long enough to put me to bed, to cover me and tell me it would be all right, to touch my cheek and my chin. 'Just sleep,

Kristen,' she said. 'Everything will seem better in the morning.' And then she went back to the hospital to wait.

I thought about the stucco woman. She would not have been surprised at the trouble I had caused. She would have seen it coming. Would Greens have driven the truck to the top of the mountain if I had not been there? And the arguing between Green's and the Old Man-what had Izzy said? 'Worse this summer.'

I had messed up the whole family.

Before it was light, I packed my things in the backpack. They did not all fit, so I left a small pile of miscellaneous items, and the bathing suit that was drying on the line. I tore off a sheet of paper from my drawing pad and wrote the note: It was my fault, all of it. I wanted to see the mountain. I am going back to Long Island.

Please do not come after me. I do not want to be a family member.

I looked back as I left, to take a picture of it all in my mind, thinking how strange it was to use my running money to run back to the stucco woman. It was even stranger that she let me walk in there so easily, clucking over my bandage, taking me to the doctor a week later to have the stitches out.

Emmy, agency hotshot, came to see me tell me Green was going to be all right. 'His ribs are broken,' she said, 'and the bones in his arms are fractured.' While her mouth was still open, ready to say something else, I told her 'I never want to go back, I never want to see any of them again.'

She tried to find out why, but when I just kept looking out the window, banging my feet on the chair rung, she sighed and let me stay with the stucco woman.

I did not do that, either. I stayed there through most of September, and then I ran.

How could I not have seen that the other day?

‘Hey, stop rowing,’ he said. ‘I’m going to take your picture.’

I looked up at him, feeling the sun on my face, feeling the happiness down to my toes, as he stood at the river’s edge and snapped the picture.

‘You’ve got a smiley face,’ he said. ‘We could put you on a stamp and sell it all over Laurel Highlands.’

‘Too bad you did not take your thumb off the lens,’ I told him.

‘Too bad you dropped the oar,’ he said. ‘It’s floating away.’

I put the picture back carefully, then went downstairs for sweaters and pulled my jacket off the hook. Something fell out as I did. It was the shell I had picked up the first time I had seen Gram’s ocean. I held it up to my face before I put it back into my pocket.

I needed to be outside. I needed to be cold, so cold I could not think of anything but the ice and the snow.

Anything, that is what the stucco woman would say.

Films of Kristen Deniel

For all, I know this picture might still be in the agency conference room. It is a drawing of a small office with beige paneling on the walls. The paneling is fake wood. There is a table in the center, someone’s initials, TR, gouged out of the wood. The picture is not finished, but Emmy and the hot cocoa woman did not know that. They thought the girl sitting at the table was me. Of course, it was not me. This girl was laughing. She was just make-believe.

I was not laughing when I sat there. I was sitting as straight as I could, but I could feel my knees shaking.

‘Mr. Regan wants to talk to you,’ Emmy said.

I shook my head, never looking at her, sketching on the paper.

She leaned forward. ‘He’s come down here, Holly.’

‘Kristen.’

‘Just see what he has to say.’

I shook my head again, but Emmy patted my hand and was out the door.

And then he was there, standing in front of me, and I still did not look up. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said in a voice so low I was not sure he heard me.

‘It was Green’s fault,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said.

‘He took the truck-’ I could see him wave his hand.

‘Kristen, it does not matter. We just want you home.’

I thought about standing up. I wanted to put my arms around him, so I went out to the car with him. I thought of what it would be like to drive up to their front door.

‘I didn’t tell Izzy and Green’s I was coming,’ he said. ‘If I had, they would have come too. I had to make sure you wanted to be with us first.’

Izzy would be standing at the door, and Green is next to her. We would be hugging each other, all of us. There would be pancakes and hard candy.

But that was just for a moment.

‘It wasn’t Green’s fault,’ I said. ‘I went up the mountain first.’

‘It doesn’t make any difference.’

He was blaming Green’s. If I went home with him, they would always blame Green’s. ‘He thinks you’re perfect,’ Green’s had said. Before I could change my mind, I shook my head. ‘I think I’ll stay down here.’

He tried to talk me out of it. I was not even hearing what he said. I stopped drawing; my hands were clenched under the table, and I never once looked up at him. After a while, he left.

Emmy came back in with tears in her eyes.

‘You want tough?’ I asked. ‘I’ll show you though.’

I grinned. The Old Man knew a lot. But I would not tell Green's that either.

I talked for another minute, telling Beatrice we would go home soon, telling her we were all right, we were fine, and then I hung up the phone.

Green yanked off his gloves with his teeth, reached for more change, and laid it out on the shelf. 'I bet you don't even know our phone number,' he said as he began to dial.

I could hear Izzy's larger-than-life voice. 'Is that you, Green's?'

He handed the phone to me, then let himself out of the phone booth to stand outside, stamping his feet.

'It's me, Izzy,' I said. 'Do you think I could come home?'

Ah, and the house in Laurel Highlands. Green's house. Nevertheless, that home was dissimilar. I would never- ever fail to recall that one. Do not think about it, Green is said in my cranium. I did that a lot; I pretended Green's was right there next to me when I knew he was miles away in upstate Philadelphia.

The next day all the kids, like me, were fighting over the crumbs of not having anything- and with that comes not having much to eat either, or if you were lucky enough to get your hands on anything at all, that resembled food. And let us not fail to mention the haughty long scraggly haired old woman; she was the power at be, also it was odd to me that there were no rugs- just sub-floors...

'What...,' Kristen began. She reached up to feel her cheek, the first time she could ever remember Gram kissing her when it was not time to leave for school or to go to bed. She put her arms around Gram. 'Grannie,' she whispered so softly she did not know if Gram had heard.

Halfway down the road, Kristen could smell the fish cooking. She could hear Poppy talking, and the rumble of Mr. Meyer's voice. Mr. Meyer's Ford was in the driveway, the headlights still painted black. She would help him scrape them off first thing tomorrow.

Gram was looking toward her and leaned over suddenly to kiss Kristen's cheek. 'It was a long war, a terrible war,' she said, 'but sometimes, even in the worst times, something lovely happens.'

I wondered if he ever said to himself, 'What is Kristen Deniel doing right this moment?' And did he put my words in his mind at all? The woman turned off the motor of the car something from the late 1924's is all I can say.

For a moment, we looked out at the trees, the leaves- in bolshies of rosy reds, yellow oakum golds, and bright burnt oranges, with just a tinge of greens this late October evening.

'We're here, Kristen,' she said, a woman in sweats, a hot cocoa stain on the front from the hot dogs we had eaten on the side of the road. Those hot dogs were a mean lump in the middle of my stomach, sloshing around with a Cola. They walked down to the Smiths on the roadside, the tufts of grass bright against the sand, Kristen carrying the cat along with her.

Kristen made a face in the mirror, then scooped up a handful of water for her face. 'I'm ready,' she said, 'ready now.'

3

Now Gram was knocking at the bathroom door. 'Poppy's gone down to the Smiths' ahead of us,' she said, 'and if you do not hurry in there, the dinner will be ruined. They are all waiting...'

She had tried to talk all the way, but I had not answered. I slumped in my seat, feet up on the glove compartment, wearing the dress with a matching hat and gloves with the hat low over my forehead. If someone looks into your eyes, I read in a book one time, he will see right into your soul.

I did not want anyone to see into my soul. I knew she was dying to tell me to get my sneakers off her dashboard, but she did not. She was waiting for her to deliver her speech.

Kristen thought about her problem list for the first time in a long time. Lies, Daydreaming, and Friends need. She did not lie anymore. Every time she started to lie, she thought of Noah and closed her mouth. She still daydreamed, though. Sister Sara had told her that all writers did that and that if you knew the difference between lies and daydreams you were in decent shape.

I could hear her getting ready for it with a puff of breath. 'This can be a fresh start, Kristen. A new place.' She licked her finger and scratched at the hot cocoa stain. 'No one knows you.

You can be different, you can be good, know what I mean?'

She gave that speech to every foster kid in every driveway as she dumped them off like the mail guy dumping off packages on a busy day, but I did not think so. I had looked into her eyes once, just the quickest look, and I had seen that she felt sorry for me, that she did not know what to do with me. Too bad for you, hot coco woman.

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. Mrs. Meyer would know about Noah and May. She went into the bathroom quickly to comb her hair and run water over her hands. The water came in spurts at first, the way it always after the winter. Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror, wondering if she looked different this year. She closed her eyes, remembering that Friday night last summer, getting ready to go to the Smiths,' and Gram holding the washcloth over her red eyes after she had cried for Poppy. And she thought about Noah, with his dark hair and blue eyes. I hummed a little of 'The Worms Sneak In, the Worms Creep Out.'

'She was an art teacher,' the hot cocoa woman said, pointing to the house. 'Retired now. I have never met her, but everyone at the agency says she is wonderful with kids...' Her voice trailed off, but I knew she had meant to say, 'kids like you.'

If only Noah was there. I walked my feet up the dashboard, so my knees came close to my chin.' No one's been here with her for a while, but Emmy said it would be a good place for you.' 'A good place for an artist like you, Kristen,' the hot cocoa woman said. 'Mr. Regan...' Emmy, the agency hotshot. I drew in my breath. The Old Man. I closed my eyes as if I were ready to doze off. 'He wanted you to have a chance to work at your drawings. He said it would be a crime if you did not.' 'It's Friday night,' Gram said over her shoulder. 'The Smiths want us to come for dinner.'

Wash your face and...'

4

Someone was fishing from a rowboat, one of the kids from Broad Channel. Kristen raised her arm to wave and smiled as the girl waved back.

Under her feet, the porch floor was gritty. Any minute Gram would be calling, telling her to give it a quick sweep, and find the sheets, and get her bed ready. Kristen reached for her book and flipped through until she found the star. She had taken it off her ceiling last night as she packed. She put a dab of glue on it and pasted it behind the bed with the others, smiling a little. Then she went into the kitchen for the broom. She had said,

‘What have we got to lose?’

Still holding the cat, Kristen wandered out to the porch and leaned on the screen. She smelled the bay and listened to the water lapping against the pilings.

Now the church bells were chiming five. Kristen followed Poppy along the path to the house. Gram had opened the door and the windows on the porch. ‘Blowing the winter out,’ she said, looking up. ‘And here’s Tom’s cat.’ But next to me, the hot cocoa woman took a deep breath. I cut my eyes in the direction of the house. I was good at that, seeing everything without turning my head, without looking up, without blinking.

I tried to yawn, but then the front door opened, and a woman came out on the porch with a mangy orange cat one step behind her. I did not bother to give them more than a glance. What did I care about what the woman looked like? ‘Lordy,’ the hot cocoa woman breathed.

Not even the hot chocolate was covering that up. I sat up straight, wondering if I should open the car door and run, or reach out to push the button down, locking myself in. I did blink then, of course, I did. Anyone getting a first look at Gram Cahill would do the same. It was not just that she was a beautiful movie-star, or that she was wearing a blue dress made of filmy stuff that floated around her, and rings on eight of her fingers. It was this: She had a knife in one hand. She held it in front of her, so it caught the glint of the late-afternoon sunshine and became a silvery light itself. ‘It’s me,’ Kristen said, her hand out, reaching.

‘Don’t you remember?’

And then the cat was in her arms, its orange coat short, rough, and warm from the sun. Kristen bent her head, rubbing her chin against the cat’s head, listening to the sound of its rusty purring. She thought of Tom, and last summer, and Christy. Kristen climbed the boardwalk steps slowly as the cat stood there, moving back a step each time she moved forward. The knife woman came close enough for me to see that the movie-star face had dozens of tiny crisscross lines on its cheeks and across its forehead.

But then she smiled, and the lines around her mouth rearranged themselves. She leaned forward and put one hand on the car window. ‘Kristen,’ she said. ‘Are you here, then?’

I could not take my eyes off her. I could feel a pencil in my hand, moving across the paper, drawing her face, her eyes, the knife. I

reached over the seat, grabbed my backpack, and was out the door, slamming it behind me. 'Poppy, look,' Kristen said. 'It is Tom's cat. The Smiths must have kept her after Noah went back to Canada.'

Suppose she never saw Noah again? She leaned over to cup her hands in the water, to splash a little on her face. Her skirt, let loose, plastered itself against her legs.

They stood there for another moment before they went toward the boardwalk together, Kristen picking up one sock looking around for the other one. And then she saw the cat, standing there, watching her, ready to run. Kristen could feel the dryness in her mouth, the sand beginning to blow against her face, stinging. 'Pap?' she asked. Slowly she held out her hand.

She dug her toes into the sandy bottom, picturing her words sliding out to see the way the waves did out to Europe. 'You're my best friend, Tom,' she whispered, 'the best friend I ever had...'

Then Poppy was in the back of her, his strong hands around her shoulders, pulling her into the dry warmth of his shirt.

Films of Kristen Deniel

This was not one picture, it was six, eight, ten. I never could get green's rights. I could see him in my head, though, close my eyes, and there he was. That first day, I was sick to my stomach from the smell of the bus, the dizzying mountain roads. I had been on that bus for hours. It seemed like weeks. The tag pinned to my shirt, Kristen COPSES, LONG ISLAND, had rubbed a raw patch into my neck. All I could think about was how thirsty I felt. I imagined ice cubes in my mouth, burning my tongue, ginger ale in a glass that was wet to the touch, root beer with two scoops of orange sherbet. I was on my way to a place called Laurel Highlands to spend the summer with a family named Regan. 'I'll be good if you don't make me go,' I had almost told the woman I was living within the stucco house. 'I won't make a sound, you'll see.' Instead, I squeezed my lips in between my teeth so hard they were hidden inside my mouth and shot lightning rays at her out of the corners of my eyes. 'Fresh air, a place in the country,' the stucco woman said, 'that's what you need.' She did not mean it, though. I heard her on the phone. 'Two months,' she said, 'two months to do what I please and not have to worry about that kid getting into everything.' She is a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.' I marched up the stairs, hitting every rung with her lime green umbrella. Anyway, I was the last one left on the bus. Up in front, the driver talked with the woman from the agency. If I ducked down in the back of the seat, would they forget about me? Would they turn around and go back to Long Island? We lumbered up the main street of Hancock, passing a

row of houses and a movie theater, and came to a stop in front of a diner.

The pelican looked as irritable as Henry. I told myself I would have a house like that one day: hat boxes and wigs have drawn on one-bathroom wall, and high-heeled shoes, dozens of them, marching along in watercolor in a tiny bedroom at the end of the hall.

That yellow kitchen was huge. A couch sat under the window, piled high with embroidered pillows that said things like HENRY'S HOME, V FOR VICTORY, SAVE THE SARGASSO SEA.

I had never even heard of the Sea.

I had drawn the house with paper from my backpack and fat bits of charcoal I had found somewhere. It was lovely to sketch the house and Gram with her scarf. She watched me sometimes as I drew Henry sitting on top of the old-fashioned radio, and the pelican with beady eyes.

5

Too bad you do not have your drawing box, I imagined

Green's saying all those yellows and blues. I was all right, though.

'We'll take a drive in the Silver Bullet today,' Gram said, sounding pleased with herself. She brushed a few shavings off the front of her dress onto the faded linoleum floor. 'I have things to show you, Kristen.' No school on a Monday? I shrugged to myself. If she wanted to forget about it, that was fine with me. I spent most of the time in the back of the classroom sketching or drawing faces in ink on the plastic desk and erasing them with one wet finger. 'Everything,' I said, putting my tongue against my top teeth in front of her face. 'Fresh.' She cupped her hand over the phone. 'Fresh as paint.' And back to the phone, whispering now: 'No wonder she has not been adopted.

'Straighten up, kid,' the bus driver said, looking into the rearview mirror. 'We're here.' I gathered up my backpack and the plastic bag they had given me: a toothbrush, a bar of soap that smelled like an old sock, a pink washcloth, and a book for drooling two-year-old is, Jo Anne Goes Camping. I tossed the book in the agency woman's lap as I passed, nose in the air, pretending I was not dying of thirst, pretending I was not bursting from having to go to the bathroom. Outside the bus window, a man leaned against the wall of the diner, his hat over his eyes, and a boy played handball against a brick wall. I climbed down into the blistering hot sun, checking out the boy.

A skinny mess he was, much taller than I, his socks falling. They looked as if they did not even match. As the bus started up, the exhaust smelled like a sewer, the boy slammed the ball against the wall, missing it on his way back. He nearly killed himself trying to dive in front of the bus for it, then jumped back at the last moment as the ball bounced across the street. I put down my backpack and the agency freebie bag darted across the street in the back of the bus and scooped up the ball with one hand. I trotted back to them, tossing it over my head and catching it a couple of times just to show them what I could do. The man pushed his hat back and grinned at me. He had a great face to draw: eyes the color of cinnamon toast, a prickly gray-black beard, deep laugh lines. 'I'm Green's Regan,' the boy said, grinning. 'How'd you get a name like that, Kristen Copses, crazy name? Do they call you Holly? We have a pile of holly bushes out in front. Touch the leaves and they draw blood. I am going to call you Holly.' The man shook his head. 'Green's.' 'Try it,' I cut in. 'How old are you anyway?' Green asked, his eyes caramel behind his glasses. 'You look like a kind of shrimp to me.'

'Twelve,' I said, bumping it up a year, 'and tough.' 'Baby. I will be thirteen December twenty-sixth.' He rushed on. 'We're having lunch at the diner. My mother stayed in Laurel Highlands.' 'Izzy's making carrot cake,' the man said. I thought about saying I hated carrots-not true, I ate nothing. Anything, the stucco house lady would say. Besides, they were standing there, Green's and his father, looking so pleased about having lunch in the diner and carrot cake for dinner, I did not have the heart, and I had to go to the bathroom.

'Bet you're thirsty.' Green's eyes narrowed. 'They've got checkers at every table. I will play you, beat you.' He wanted to pay me back for the ball trick. His father frowned. He knew it too. But I was all right with it; I was fine with it. I skittered into the diner, straight to the restroom, and then sat with them at their table drinking root beer floats, cold and sweet, with wet napkins underneath the glasses. After I had downed half of mine, Green ticked off the things he wanted me to know. 'I call the old man Pop,' he said. 'You can call me that,' the father said. I took a chance. 'I'm going to call you Old Man.' He laughed. 'Try it.' I could tell he did not mind, though. 'What's next is I'm a walker,' Green said. 'Walk me- myself and I, all over Laurel Highlands. I will walk you, too.' 'Maybe,' I said. 'I know motors,' he said. 'I drive a truck.' 'Don't believe that.' The Old Man snorted. 'Not even thirteen years old.' 'I almost drove, then,' Green said, giving me a wink. 'Legal any day now.' The Old Man rolled his eyes at me. 'And the last thing, I know tracks.' Green spread his arms wide. 'Animal Tracks. All of them.' I was laughing. I knew he meant for me to laugh. He pushed the black checkers over to me. 'Let us see what you can do here, Kristen Copses,' he said. 'Win and I'll teach you how to drive.'

‘In your dreams,’ the Old Man said. We played a couple of checkers games, Green is taking wild chances, while we dripped ketchup from our hamburgers onto the table and the Old Man egged us on. Anyway, the picture I was trying for was green’s playing checkers with me that first day. That was the picture I could never get perfect. It was because he let me win that first game; it was because I let him win the next one. And it was because for the first time I saw what it might be like to have a brother.

Today the water was almost calm. Tiny waves folded on themselves, then slid out to sea, leaving small fingers of foam on the damp sand. Kristen waded in, bunching up her skirt. The water was icy cold on her feet and ankles, numbing. She looked out at the gray triangular rock that jutted out near the end of a jetty, the place where she and Noah had first looked for Europe.

She pressed her forehead against the car window, staring at the marshes, watching a seagull as it swooped down toward the pale reeds. She did not want Gram or Poppy to know her eyes were prickling, and her throat was tight.

‘The same,’ Poppy said. ‘I told you. It is all the same.’ Kristen and Gram looked at each other, nodding, remembering. It would never be the same.

And then they were there. She hardly waited for the car to stop moving before she went out the back door, running for the sand and the water. She kicked off her shoes and left them on the empty boardwalk, peeling off socks halfway across the beach.

(1945)

It was summer at last. Kristen was wedged in the backseat of Poppy’s old Ford with the suitcases, and bags, and rolled-up sweaters. Her feet, resting on Gram’s tackle box, were tangled in a mess of fishing line.

They were going back to Ridgway, back to the house stilts, back to the hills at last.

The Ford had new tires now, and gas in the tank, and three of them, Kristen. Poppy and Gram sang with the breeze coming in through the open windows. Kristen knew they were there when they passed Lynnnatta’s house. The bottom-floor windows were still shuttered, but the one in the attic was shiny and almost black in the sun’s reflection. Lynnette would not be there this summer, might never come back to Ridgway. Eddie was still lost somewhere in France, and

Gram had heard that Mrs. Dillon could not bear to be there without him.

‘Listen, Kristen...’ Gram turned in the front seat, tucking strands of her hair into her bun. Kristen could feel it even before she saw it: the bridge and the galumphing sound as the tires hit each plank. ‘It is saying, ‘Welcome back, welcome back.’ ‘Gram raised her plump arms in the air. ‘Alleluia.’ Kristen nodded a little, but the bridge was not saying that for her. It was saying, ‘he is gone, he is gone.’

Interval: 4 Moments that Would not Fade Part: 2

6

‘No.’ Poppy shook his head. ‘Tom’s mother and father had written a newspaper in Hungary, a brave newspaper, and the nuns were afraid to keep her in Paris. Instead, they smuggled her out one night, and took her west, took her to a convent in Saint-Laurent, a convent with horses and cows and a river, the Sèvre...’

On the other side of the car, the hot cocoa woman was out too. ‘Tea?’ the movie star asked the hot cocoa woman as if she were reading her grocery list. ‘Coffee? Lemonade? Orange juice?’

Poppy reached out for the picture, smiling. ‘She had a dozen mothers there. One to teach her English, one to teach her French, one to show her how to milk the cows and make cheese-’

‘And did you see her?’ Kristen asked in a rush. ‘Did you tell her about Tom? Tell her about me?’

‘Yes, to all of that,’ he said. ‘I showed her your picture.’

‘And Tom...’

Poppy put his hand over hers. ‘She said she missed Noah every day. She is waited through this whole war to go to Canada.

She said she felt sad because she had not said goodbye to him.’

Kristen sat there looking at Poppy, wanting to ask what he had told Christy, almost afraid to hear. ‘What...?’ She began.

‘What did I say?’ he asked her, smiling. ‘I told her that saying goodbye did not matter, not a bit. What mattered were all the days you were together before that, all the things you remembered.’ Kristen took a deep breath. She squeezed Poppy’s hand. The hot cocoa

woman shook her head. She was still thinking about the knife. 'I just want to get Kristen settled,' she said uneasily.

'I'm settled,' I said.

We all stood there for another few minutes, the hot cocoa woman trying to fill the space around us with talk. Then, at last, she opened the car door again and was gone.

'Want to call me Gram?' The movie star rubbed her forehead absently with the knife handle. 'If you want to do the Cahill part you say it 'Kale,' you know, like that vegetable.' She jerked her head toward the cat. 'That's Henry. He is a little irritable sometimes.' I followed her up the path and around to the back of the house. Henry came too, reaching out to stab my leg with one irritable claw.

Gram looked back over her shoulder. 'Hungry?' I shook my head; the hot dogs were just settling in. 'Drop your things,' she said, waving the knife. 'We'll get them later.' 'I've lived here'- Gram raised one eyebrow- 'since they invented the spoon.' In the back of the house was a different world: a garden on the edge of the Copses, Deniel so small I could see around them to houses on the next street. 'Who did that, anyway?' I asked, trying her out.

Her other eyebrow shot up. 'The knife and fork people, who else?'

She patted the scarf and turned to look at me, head tilted.

The carved tree Laural Highlands were stuck in the dirt in front of the Copses, some of them thicker than my arm, others pencil thin. All of them had faces, and bits of grass or wreaths of flowers circled their wooden heads. I touched this one and that, using two fingers, the ones I used to shadow in my drawings. One of the figures I pulled my hat down over my eyes and stared at her figures. She was an artist.

Films of Kristen Copses. I thought I was alone, sitting on the but Noah steps in front of the house, drawing the Old Man, working with a flesh-peach pencil. Quick sketches, one after the other: hat down over his eyes in the first, standing in front of the river in the next, sleeping in the hammock in the third. His beard and the way he leaned forward, listening. I was trying to capture what he looked like, so I would have it to take back with me. To remember. The screen door opened in the back of me with that soft swishing noise, and the Old Man came out to look over my shoulder. 'Oh, Kristen,' he said. 'Where'd you learn to do that?' I shook my head. 'Kristen?' I looked toward the river, green today, a willow hanging over the edge. He put

his hand on my shoulder. 'It's a gift,' he said, 'to draw things the way they are.' I sat very still. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. 'And something else,' he said. 'You shine through in your drawings.' I looked up at him, really looked at him, not a glance that darted away so he could not see my eyes. 'My name ...,' I began as he folded himself down on the step next to me. 'Kristen Denielis is a real place.' I shrugged a little. 'Kristen wood,' I said. 'One word, I think.' When the Old Man spoke, I jumped. 'It's where they found you, as a baby?' 'An hour old,' I said in an I-don't-care voice.

'No blanket. On a corner. Somewhere.' Didn't a baby deserve a blanket? 'And just the scrap of paper: CALL HER Kristen COPSES.' One day I went to see that place. I ran away from one of my houses-tan, green, brick? I circled Queens, on the subway, off the subway, onto the Q2 bus, and off the Q2 bus, until I found the spot. It was winter, bleak, but the houses were pretty. I never did find the Copses, though. I tried to picture it in the spring when I had been born, with birds chirping and the sun shining. Now I saw Green come into view in the rowboat. 'I play hookey,' I told the Old Man.

'Everyone says I'm tough, they say I'm trouble.' The Old Man made a sound in the back of his throat. 'Green's is a great kid,' I said. The Old Man looked surprised. I waited to hear if he would say anything, but Green's banged the rowboat hard into the rocks along the bank. The Old Man made another sound. 'Watch that, Green's.' 'The Kingfisher is on the branch downstream,' Green is called. So, we went down to the boat and climbed in to have a look.

7

Kristen leaned back against the pew, thinking how thirsty she was. She was dying for a glass of orange soda, or a peach with juice dripping. If Mass did not end soon, and she did not get something to drink...

Gram was looking at her, frowning, so she started to pray again. She prayed for everyone she could think of, even Sister Jillian.

She looked at the stained-glass window. Outside, everything was red, orange, or yellow. And inside were the sounds of the fan whirring and feet shuffling. They would find Eddie. He had just gotten mixed up and had to find his way back, or they had made a mistake and some other Eddie was lost.

She sat up straight. She had just thought of something. Eddie's picture. She had left it on the table next to the couch in the living room. How was she going to explain to Gram where she had it? What would Gram say if she knew Kristen had been in and out of the

Dillons' empty house? Gram would say plenty. Kristen is in trouble for the rest of the summer. And she would never get back into Lynnnatta's house until the end of the war.

She tried to figure out what to do. She could feel her heart pounding at the thought of Gram reaching for that picture when they got home. She wondered if Gram had seen her put it down.

Gram always saw everything she did not want her to.

But if she had not, if Kristen could get to the living room first, she could grab up the picture, and then...

And then what? She did not have a cent since the tan purse had sunk in the water. How was she going to send it?

And right now, kneelers were banging back, and people were standing. Mrs. White was playing the organ, and everyone was singing 'Holy God, We Praise Thy Name.'

Kristen edged herself out of the pew before they finished singing. 'See you,' she whispered to Gram. And before Gram could answer, Kristen had ducked ahead of Mrs. Colgan and the other people going down the aisle. She took another quick dip of holy water and raced home.

Gram had locked the door, of course. Kristen rattled the knob and shoved it with her shoulder, but it did not do any good. She was lucky Gram liked to stand and talk to Mrs. Colgan after church for a few minutes.

She went around the back and slipped off her good shoes and socks. She would have to climb down into the rowboat and shine up the pilings into her bedroom.

She stopped. A couple of kids from Broad Channel were rowing out in their boat. They were staring back at her.

She waited a moment, hoping they would turn away and start fishing or something, but they just sat there, one of them fooling around with the oars, watching her.

Gram would be home in five minutes.

'Forgot my key,' she called and dropped into her rowboat.

She wondered what they thought about her wearing a pale-yellow Sunday dress as she boosted herself up on the piling and tried to reach the screen.

She could not seem to get high enough, and somehow the hem of her dress was soaking wet. Gram would go on and on about how she would have to wash, starch, and iron it again.

Kristen could hear voices. Gram's voice. Mrs. Colgan's. They were next door, standing there. All they had to do was look down the alley.

She tried to raise her barefoot higher on the rough wood. Any minute she would have a splinter. And any minute Gram would spot her. She held on to the piling with her legs, and feet, and one arm, as tightly as she could, reaching up for the screen, trying to get her fingernails underneath.

And then, finally, she felt the screen give. She pulled it out, opened it wide, then reached out for the sill, holding on, boosting herself in, just as she heard Gram saying, 'Good grief, what's that child doing now?'

She raced through the porch and into the living room, grabbing Eddie's picture, and then raced back again to shove it under her bed. By the time Gram was in the house, Kristen was in the bathroom with the door closed and locked, leaning her head under the faucet in the sink, taking deep gulps.

Her dress was a mess, filthy, with a rip in the hem. She took it off as fast as she could, rolled it up in a ball, and reached for her old bathing suit, which was dangling in the shower.

Gram was knocking on the door. 'Kristen. Are you there? Whatever made you think of getting into a house like that? You could fall and kill yourself. Kristen?'

'I'm trying to get my bathing suit on.'

'I'd like to see the condition of that dress.'

Kristen crossed her fingers. 'It's all right.'

'I'll bet,' Gram said.

Kristen could hear her footsteps going into the bedroom. She took the dress and slid out the door and onto the porch. She pulled

Eddie's picture out from under the bed, wrapped it in a towel, and looked around for a place to hide the wet dress.

Under the mattress. She would figure out what to do with it later.

She was out the door, yelling a quick goodbye before she could hear a word about the piano. But Gram had turned on the news. 'It is estimated that ten thousand have been killed in the invasion of France.'

Kristen went up the road to cut across the Smiths' lawn and find Tom.

A moment later, they were rushing down the back road, Noah asking where they were going, why they were in such a hurry.

'To the fishing wharf,' she said. 'I must find a purse. A tan one.'

'I will help. Where-'

'Under about seven feet of water, and we have to hurry because Gram will be along to capture me any minute.'

He shook his head. 'Why-'

'She is going to find my soaking wet, ripped Sunday dress. She is going to remember I have not practiced the... You ask a lot of-'

'And what is in that towel?'

'Do not say another word, Tom. Not unless you have a pack of money in your pocket. Otherwise, let me think about how I am going to dive down and find that purse.'

'But-'

'That purse has to be somewhere under the water unless a bunch of pirates has moved in.'

'When...'

Kristen sighed. 'Will you stop asking questions? We are in a hurry here.'

A truck had scattered gravel all over the approach to the wharf. It was a good thing Noah had shoes on. It was a good thing her own feet were tough.

Not tough enough. By the time they had gotten to the wharf, she was walking on the sides of her feet, hobbling along. 'I hope your eyes are good,' she said. 'I want you to look into this water and tell me...'

Noah nodded. She could tell he was trying not to laugh.

'What?' she said.

'You look so... so odd walking like that, and your bathing suit...'

'...is a little faded.' She looked down. She had put on her oldest one, almost no color left from Gram's Clorox. Too bad. She put the towel with the picture down on a bench and crouched on the edge of the dock to look down into the water.

'Dark,' she said. 'Really dark today, you can't see a thing.'

He was looking too. 'I see a fish.'

'What good is that?' she asked. 'It is about two inches from the top. We are looking for a purse on the bottom.'

'Down with the bar-nackles,' he said, grinning.

She was still smiling as she rolled over the side and hit the water. It was cold this morning, the water was rough. She kicked hard to push herself down, opening her eyes in the saltwater, trying to see the sand. She swam along the bottom until she thought her lungs would burst, then shot up to the top for a huge gulp of air.

She held on to the wharf for a moment, pushing her hair out of her face with one hand, and felt Noah grab her wrist. She looked at him through blurry eyes. 'What?'

'I have money,' he said.

She nodded. 'Let me try once more.'

But he would not let go. 'Let me give you this money,' he said slowly, 'if it is important. It is important money.'

She took another breath. She knew she would not find the purse today. It was so dark below, and it could be hours. She nodded and climbed back up to the wharf.

‘It’s for Lynnnatta,’ she told him, going over to unroll the towel, sitting on the bench. She showed him Eddie’s picture, with his buck teeth smiling up at them. Then she said the rest in a rush, the words spilling out, trying to make him see what Eddie was like, how much Lynnnatta loved him, how Lynnnatta could not remember his face, how she had to send the picture, how...

Noah listened; then he touched the edge of the picture. ‘I cannot remember Christy’s face,’ he said. ‘I can remember Nagymamma’s. She was sitting in the back of her restaurant the day we went away. She was sewing my coat. The collar was wet when she gave it back to me. It was wet from where she was crying. It crackled when I felt it.

‘There is money,’ he said slowly. ‘It is in the coat collar. It is Magyar, Hungarian money, and English money, and American money. Nagymamma said when I touched it again to remember...’ He stopped.

Kristen wanted to ask him ‘Remember what?’ but he looked so sad, she just nodded and used the towel to dry her face.

‘Lilllllyyy.’ The voice was loud, sharp.

Her grandmother was standing at the other end of the road, hand shading her eyes.

Caught.

Kristen stood there, trying to decide what to do. Then she handed the rolled-up towel with the picture to Tom. ‘Don’t drop it,’ she whispered.

‘Lilllllyyy,’ the voice came again.

‘What?’ She stood there; she did not move. Gram always wanted her to come when she called as if she were a cat. ‘Lilllllyyy.’

She gritted her teeth. ‘Hold on to that with your life, Tom.’ She started back along the path toward Gram, biting her lip as the gravel jabbed into her feet.

‘It’s hard to believe you’re walking all over the place wearing that bathing suit,’ Gram said as soon as Kristen got close enough to hear. ‘And where are your shoes? Any minute you are going to get a splinter. Blood poison next. Besides,’ she rushed on, ‘you look like a hoyden. I do not know what people will think.’

Hoyden. Kristen did not even know what it meant. She sighed a huge sigh. Let Gram see she thought she was acting like a pain. 'I'm going swimming.'

'At the fishing dock?'

'Well...'

'It's time to practice the piano, Kristen.'

'I'm not-' Kristen began.

'Yes,' Gram said. 'Your father spent all that money to bring that piano here from St. Paul's. For you.'

'Poppy doesn't care.' Kristen shifted from one foot to the other. A stone was digging right through her skin into her bones. Gram was right. She was going to end up with blood poisoning, and Lynnnatta was never going to get Eddie's picture.

'You were the one who wanted piano lessons,' Gram said.

Kristen could see beads of perspiration on Gram's upper lip. It was hot as a blister, and they were going to stand there arguing forever.

Gram was right, though. The piano lessons were all her ideas. But that was last winter. How was she to know that it took forever to learn the piano, that you could not even play a decent song like 'Mairzy Doats' or 'Swinging on a Star' unless you spent your whole life sitting at the piano bench, while everyone else in the entire world was-

'Will you stop daydreaming, Kristen?' Gram said. 'Get yourself home. Change out of that bathing suit, and practice for a half hour.'

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. Head up, she marched up the road and headed for home.

She threw the bathing suit on the shower floor, put on a pair of shorts and a top, and went to the piano bench. The back door closed a moment later. Gram was home.

Kristen looked up at the old alarm clock on top of the piano. One o'clock. She looked at the hands for a while. It almost seemed as if they were not moving. She stood up and put her ear next

to it. It was still ticking, but slowly. It would take forever to get to one-thirty.

‘Kristen?’ Gram called from the kitchen.

She curled her fingers over the keys and started in on the C scale. At the same time, she looked out the window. The sea was tinged with green. Her father would say it had something to do with algae. There was only the slightest swell now, a perfect afternoon to teach Noah to swim.

She closed her eyes, picturing the troopship they had seen, huge and ghostly in the mist. For a moment she thought about what it would be like if they could do it. Wouldn’t it be something if they could get the rowboat close enough to swim the last few feet, the last few yards? Wouldn’t it be something if she could teach Noah to swim well enough for that? Even if he could just keep himself afloat, she could help him. And even if it were not Poppy’s ship, it would be going to Europe. Noah could get to Christy, and she- Gram was standing at the living room door. ‘What are you daydreaming about?’ she asked.

Kristen frowned. ‘How much I hate this piano.’

‘Just try,’ Gram said. ‘You can do anything if you work at it. And you love music.’

Kristen did not answer. She started the C scale over and did not look up until Gram was rattling around in the kitchen again.

You can do anything.

Could she?

What was she thinking of, anyway? What she had to do was get Eddie’s picture wrapped and mailed before the post office closed at four. Instead, she was stuck in front of the piano, the keys a little dusty, with the John Thompson book in front of her.

She played the C scale as loudly as she could, up and down, faster, faster. It made a terrific noise. She could hear Gram bang a cabinet door shut. Kristen was driving her crazy.

Terrific. She played around with her hand down low at the base... making up some Hazel Scott boogie music as she went along.

‘Kristen.’

Back to the C scale. The loudest C scale anyone had ever heard.

Nothing from the kitchen.

Kristen began to flip through the John Thompson book.

Etudes, mazurkas (whatever they were,) waltzes. 'The Blue Danube.'

She picked the music out with one finger. Da da da da dum dum. She knew that she had heard it before. And that was Tom's River.

She leaned over to reach Gram's atlas on the bookshelf. It was heavy and smelled of the attic in St. Paul's. She put it down next to her on the bench and went through the pages, An Africa, Antilles. G Germany. That was the Nazi place. It showed a little of Hungary on the edge. Aid there was H Hungary two pages later.

She tried to spot Budapest or the Danube River, but all she could find were a bunch of black lines wandering up and down on a yellow blotch that looked like a piece of a puzzle.

In the center of the book was a map of the entire world.

She ran her finger across it... from Hungary to Austria, to Switzerland, to France. She smiled a little. Madeline in the book had been there. She remembered that. The Madeline was in Paris.

And so was Christy.

That night it was-

'Spicy, that chicken,' Beatrice said.

I managed to nod, to chew, at last, to swallow, thinking of the Old Man: 'Where'd you ever learn to do that?' And Izzie.

'You have a gift, simple.'

After dinner Beatrice spread the films out on the table, reaching for my pad on the counter, one eyebrow raised to ask if she could have a piece of paper. With a twist of her pencil, she showed me how to deepen the shadows on a drawing of the sea.

'Do it on my drawing,' I said.

'Never,' she told me. 'It's your world, it belongs to you.'

She ran the pencil through her hair, separating the thick strands.

‘Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see.’

‘Yes, maybe,’ I said, not sure what she meant. ‘And sometimes what you see is so deep in your head you are not even sure of what you are seeing. But when it is down there on paper, and you look at it, really look, you will see the way things are.’ I frowned. ‘Look at a picture one way and you’ll see one thing,’ I said. ‘Look again and you might see something else. That is what the Old Man ...’ I shook my head. ‘A friend of mine said that once.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Beatrice said, sketching in an eye, bushy eyebrows, sharp lashes as she spoke. ‘But that is the world, isn’t it? You must keep looking to find Christy.’ She ran one pinky finger over the eyebrow; the pencil smeared just enough to curve it upward, like a question mark; the other pinky softened the lashes.

I watched her, fascinated. ‘And something else,’ she said. ‘You, the artist, can’t hide from the world because you’re putting yourself down there too.’ ‘I’m not hiding,’ I said, my eyes sliding away from her.

She laughed. ‘Good thing because your soul is right there in front of you.’ She pointed to the sketch I had drawn of Gram in her scarf. ‘You see, it’s what you think of her.’ She turned to Gram. ‘Maybe I can take that trip now, leave you in Kristen’s hands. She loves you already.’

I could see that Gram did not know what Beatrice meant. ‘A trip?’

‘To the Southwest.’

Gram nodded then. ‘Yes. Adobe houses, desert, flat rocks everywhere.’

‘I’ll paint them all,’ Beatrice said.

I looked from one to the other. Beatrice had picked up the pencil again, sketching herself, drawing a suitcase in her hand. And then she looked at me once more. ‘You’re going to be something, you and what language you speak on paper.’ She drew her other hand waving. ‘I love what you have to say, Kristen Copses.’

I sat there, hardly breathing.

‘You have that,’ she said. ‘It is more than most people ever have. Count yourself lucky.’

Beatrice took a forkful of food, eating absently, staring at me the whole time. ‘We worked with all those kids who did not have any concept of perspective, or even if they had that, the composition was all wrong. If only you had been in one of those classes, Kristen.’ She shook her head, then smiled at Gram. ‘Never- ever mind, she’s here now.’ They were both looking at me, at the tears in my eyes.

I could not swallow what was in my mouth. It was there in a lump, as large as the lump in my throat. ‘Thank you,’ I managed to say. ‘Thank you.’ I scooped up the chicken, piling as many cashews as I could on the spoon. She did not eat, not until she had looked at all of them, holding each one up to the light. Gram kept nodding, reaching over with her fork to point at a line or a figure. And then Beatrice sat back. ‘Imagine. I never saw anyone who was able to do this,’ she said, ‘and I was an art teacher for forty years.’

8

I could feel a laugh coming as she waved her hand. ‘This is my place.’ Like- had a filmy scarf around its neck and held a bird’s nest in its bent arms. ‘You?’ I asked.

‘I’ll make one of you,’ Gram Cahill said. ‘We’ll have to find the right piece of wood. There is one at the back. The shape of the head is there already, the nose sharp, and the eyes ...’ She stopped. ‘But only if you stay. It will take weeks for me to do.

Months.’

I tried to think of what to say. I never stayed anywhere for long before I ran. One morning I would wake up and I would have had enough. I would grab my backpack and go. I would spend time together in the city, see a couple of movies, or if the weather were nice, I would head over to Jones Beach and sleep under the boardwalk. Sometimes it took them days to find me. But they never sent me back to the same place. The people in their houses had had enough of me, too.

Gram waited for me to answer. ‘We taught that long?’ Gram said. ‘Forty-four for you.’ Beatrice brushed her hair. ‘But did I ever once ...’ I had been at Gram Cahill’s house for three weeks. One morning when I awoke, I realized my thumb was blistered, but I did not mind. We had been cleaning up the grove of trees. I liked the feeling of hacking and slashing and getting things done. A pile of wood rested under Gram’s back table now. ‘Not all of it is for whittling,’ she had told me. ‘As soon as it is cold, we’ll make enormous fires in the

fireplace.’ ‘No, neither did I.’ Gram smiled at me, reaching across to touch my wrist with one hand.

I knew she was wondering if I would still be there when the cold came. I wondered too. And then she was flying down the stairs, reaching out, as Poppy pushed a duffel bag in ahead of him, and held out his arms for her. A moment later, Gram came down the hall. He held them both, the three of them rocking for a minute until Gram said, ‘I smell the oatmeal burning.’

Kristen hated hot cereal. ‘I’m late,’ she began. ‘I don’t have time for...’ But she never finished the sentence. She heard the noise of the key in the front lock and stopped halfway down the stairs. She had heard that key so many times, and now she felt the blast of chilly air coming up as the door opened. She felt as if she could not breathe because she knew who it was, knew who it had to be.

They went into the kitchen, Gram bustling around to make tea, and Poppy leaning against the wall, his eyes closed. ‘I’ve thought about this,’ he said.

They sat there the whole morning talking, school forgotten. Poppy told them about his ship passing Ridgway. and seeing the Ferris wheel rising in Playland like a ghost. He told them about France, and how he felt when he stood watching as the flame at the grave of the unknown soldier was light again.

Then, at last, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pile of films, Kristen’s mother in her wedding dress, Kristen in the rowboat, Gram standing on the dock. Last was a picture of a girl in a Jeep. She was holding an umbrella and smiling.

‘Christy,’ Kristen said, tracing the girl’s face with her fingers.

‘Christy.’ Poppy leaned forward. ‘I took your letter...’
‘Mine and Tom’s,’ Kristen said.

Poppy nodded. ‘I went to the convent, the daughters
Wisdom, they are called...’

‘And she was there.’

9

(ST. PAUL’S, 1945)

Kristen was going to be late for school. She pulled on her uniform and ran a comb through her hair. Downstairs Gram was calling, 'Don't forget a sweater, and if you're looking for your boots...'

Kristen sighed. Next Gram would remind her she had left them on the living room rug again. Kristen took a quick look out at the white flakes that had begun to drift down. It had been a long winter. She was tired of snow and sleet, sick of chapped lips and colds, and the wind that rattled against the windows. It seemed as if summer would never come, and worse, that the war would go on forever. She looked around for her books and her journal, ELIZABETH MOLLOHAN, MY THOUGHTS.

She had written her way through the winter... to Poppy, and Tom, and Lynnnatta, but most of all in the journal, to Sister Sara. Once she had talked about the way the sea rolled and churned when it stormed, and how homesick she was for Gram's house on stilts. Another time she had written about Tom, and the day they had said goodbye.

I raised one shoulder. 'I'm not sure.'

'Henry and I will treat you like our best company for as long as you stay,' she said.

A table leaned against the back of the house, an old redwood table with tools: a drill, an axe, and knives sharp enough to split hairs. Henry crouched at the top of the path, eyes slit, tail switching at me. 'I'm glad he's not a tiger,' I said, feeling that laughter again. Gram's eyes danced. 'Maybe we'll go back and cut that piece of wood anyway.'

I reached for the ax, then followed Gram Cahill into the Copses. And in my head, I told Green's, I may just stay for a while.

What do you think of that?

Kristen closed her eyes now, thinking about that last afternoon of the summer. The tide had been high and the ocean a deep blue. She had walked with him out to the jetty. They had stood there balancing themselves on the gray rock, and she had taken the star out of her pocket for him then, one of her mothers from the porch wall. Without thinking, she had stood on tiptoes to give a quick kiss on the cheek, and they had both laughed.

I sat there with my mouth full, looking around at her kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, filled with surprises: The walls

were creamy yellow, and ships sailed along with blue ocean moldings. A painted pelican was perched over the stove.

Kristen thought about Sister Sara now. 'Some people never have a friend like that,' Sister had said. 'You were both lucky, Kristen. even if it was only for the summer.' And then she tapped one finger on the journal. 'You have promised, Kristen.'

'How did you know about that?' Kristen had asked, thinking about Poppy and the books.

Still, it was a terrific breakfast, with Rice Krispies crackling in the speckled bowl. Fall leaves swept across the garden, and Gram's plane went across the wood with a swish-swish sound.

Kristen started downstairs for breakfast this morning, saying the word in her head, promise, half-listening as Gram called, 'Hot cereal on a chilly day.' But Sister had not meant that at all. 'I mean promise as a writer,' she had said.

10

I had taken only two days off so far, reminding myself that the hot cocoa woman would be checking up on me. And the absence notes I wrote myself and signed in a spidery hand that looked like Gram's were masterpieces: Kristen had a high fever over the weekend. Please send her home if she looks flushed. Or Kristen had a severe rash. We learned that she is allergic to tomatoes. Pity. She enjoys them.

I slid onto a seat opposite her at the table. In front of me was a box of cereal, two bananas, and a Danish neatly cut in half.

The Danish was a little stale and the bananas beginning to freckle. Other days chocolate chips were sprinkled into the cereal, but they must have all been gone.

I shoved the last of a banana into my mouth and watched as Gram plopped a straw hat with a rose onto her head and wrapped one of those filmy scarves twice around her neck; then I followed her out to the garage.

I stretched, not ready to get up, and looked around the bedroom. It was wonderful, the first place the sun hit every day so that squares of light turned the room to lemon gold. I stayed under the rose-and-white quilt for a few moments, then pulled on my clothes to go down to the kitchen.

Gram was bent over the table, eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose, working on a piece of wood. From the hall, I could see her reflection in the kitchen window. She knew I was there, but she just cut another sliver off the wood and blew it away.

They headed back toward Kristen's. By this time, it was almost dark. They had been in the movie for hours. Overhead the first star was just visible.

At last, they stood up, blinking, and went through the lobby.

'Of course, we could not see them,' Noah said. 'So many people.' 'Of course not,' Kristen said. 'But we know they were there. And someday we will ask...' Noah was smiling at her, nodding. 'And they will tell us.'

Kristen and Noah leaned forward, staring at the faces surrounding the cathedral, looking for Christy, looking for Poppy.

Kristen could almost picture them there, together.

She looked up at the sky. Only a few days were left of summer. And then she thought of the stars on the porch wall at the back of her bed. Her mother's stars. She would peel one for him. He could paste it on the little cardboard with Christy's address. Yes, she thought she would give it to him before they left.

And Kristen too, 'Thank you.' Then the tricolor, France's flag, went up on the cathedral, and people began to sing the French anthem, the 'Marseillaise.'

She cried too, but they were not the only ones. She could hear crying all through the theater. They watched the main street of Paris, the Champs Elysées, filled with two million people, old women with white hair, men with flags, children, and nuns. Young women were throwing kisses at the American soldiers, who were riding on tanks covered with flowers.

In one huge voice, the French were shouting, 'Merci. Merci. Merci...'

Kristen grabbed Tom's arm. 'You will be able to write to Christy. The Nazis will be gone and... Poppy will go to her.'

'Christy,' Noah was saying at the same time. 'Christy is there. I wonder what she is doing now, at this moment.'

Two days later, they could guess. Noah treated Kristen to movies and a bag of popcorn, and they watched *The Eyes and Ears of the World* four times.

They saw films of the great Cathedral of Notre-Dame and heard the story of the little plane that had flown in just above its dome on Thursday. It had dropped the message: 'Tomorrow we come.'

Next, to her, Kristen could see Noah clutching the arms of the chair. His face was turned away from her, and she knew he was crying. The car was ancient, a Buick from the eighties. The fenders were dented, and a streak of white paint ran across the door, but inside, the seats were soft and furry, and hanging from the windshield was a small tree figure of a man with gray whiskers.

No, not a man. It was Henry standing on his back legs.

'I put acorn boxing gloves on him, but they kept falling off,' Gram said. 'You do not have to worry about Henry. Henry's ready to stick up for you whenever the chips are down.'

Films of Kristen Copses. 'Do you know how to fish?'

Green asked. 'If I wanted to.' I squinted at the river; I did not know how to fish, did not know how to swim. I was still trying to figure out how to stay away from that water when the Old Man brought the fishing rods out of the shed. Izzy Regan, the mother, came out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind her. She waved at us. 'Hey, guys, catch me something to go with pole beans and corn on the cob.' 'Yuck to the beans,' Green said.

'I like pole beans,' I said. The river meandered along in front of Regans' summer house, and on the opposite side was the Old Man's Mountain. What about that mountain? Coming from Long Island, I had never gotten within yelling distance of anything more than a hill. So why did this mountain look so familiar?

I stretched my neck to look up and up at its rocky self mostly covered with evergreens. 'You'll fall over,' Green said. I shrugged, reaching for my backpack. Inside were a bunch of colored pencils, stubby things I had collected wherever I could find them. It would take six of them, blues, greens, and grays, to get the color of the river the way it was the first time I saw it.

I had heard of polecats, but never pole beans. Izzy nodded at me. 'It is great to have a girl around, Holly. We must stick together against these guys.' Izzy was the tallest woman I had ever seen. Her blond hair was wrapped around her head, and she was smiling just for

me. And then we were down on the bank, barefoot, standing in the shade of a few scrub pines. The Old Man put a rod threaded with a lure into my hand. 'The best one,' he said.

'This is for luck.' He showed me how to cast so my arm went back and over my head and the line sang out. I watched the feathery lure glide on the water and then did it again, and again. I could see them but Noah of the river. I could stand on that soft sand dotted with rocks, I thought, and be safe. I put one foot into the cool water and then the other, feeling tiny fish nibbling at my ankles. Across the way was the mountain, tall and green.

'Pop's mountain,' Green is said. 'I will show you tomorrow. There is a road going up ...' The Old Man tightened his mouth. 'Be careful of that road. I am afraid of it.' Green twitched one shoulder. 'I'm not afraid of anything.' Anything, I thought. The stucco house woman seemed a world away. We stood there, the Old Man pointing to a catfish nosing its way along, then a frog sunning itself on a rock, and I closed my eyes. I knew the East Branch of the Delaware River was home. Like a miracle, I caught my first fish that afternoon. They hooked it and watched the silver curve as it broke the surface of the water. It was a huge fish, and

Greens said, 'Bet you a buck you can't hold on to it.'

He was right there with the net, though, wanting me to get it, as I slipped on the rocks, feeling the water on my legs and then my back as I slid. I tried to get my balance with one hand, my feet going out from under me, not sure how deep the river was, wondering if my head would go under. Green's arm was on my elbow then, holding me up, and the Old Man called, 'You're all right, Kristen.'

My feet anchored into the sand then. I edged myself back, pulling on the rod, and then the fish was mine. Green poured a pailful of cool water over my head, so my hair was dripping, my clothes soaked. The Old Man was smiling, nodding, and Izzy came down to the bank to see what was going on. Later I drew it all, and whenever I look at the picture, I remember the taste of the fish that night, grilled on the coals, my feet bare under the porch table, and in front of us, the river. I remember Izzy touching my shoulder as she stood up to get something from the kitchen. Why did I have to mess everything up?

11

'Delicious?'

She frowned. 'Yes, but...'

‘Ah,’ I said, trying to guess. ‘Stew? Pasta? Hero sandwiches?’

She shook her head. ‘Delicious.’

I finished my drawing and propped it up on the counter to see what I thought about it. And then I heard the back door,

Beatrice bustling in, her arms laden with bags, and the smell...

‘Chinese food,’ I told Gram.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘That’s what we always have.’

I put the plates out, the knives and forks, and Gram ladled the food into bowls: cashew chicken, moo goo gai pan, bean curd, the smells making my mouth water.

Beatrice stood in the back of me. I looked over my shoulder. She was leaning over, her head tilted, looking at my picture. ‘Did you draw this?’

I nodded.

She took off her glasses and chewed on one stem.

‘Surprising, isn’t it?’ She asked Gram.

‘More than that,’ Gram said, beaming, moving Henry off her chair before she sat down.

As I reached for a shrimp roll, Beatrice slid into the seat opposite me and spooned rice onto my plate, the picture still in her hand.

‘Don’t eat,’ she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Not yet. Trot out some more of your films, please.’

I went into Gram’s peach living room with the lilac couch. We talked up a few of the films I had made: Henry and the Pelican, the Rock Jetties, Gram’s Thin Tree Figures in the Back Garden.

I pulled out the tacks and brought the drawings into the kitchen. There was no room for them on the table, so I pulled up an extra chair and piled them on that.

‘Now you can eat,’ Beatrice said, reaching for the top one.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I sat on the porch steps drawing the mountain while I waited for Green’s. He was hanging over the motor of the Old Man’s truck, fiddling with hoses or connections, muttering to himself. ‘If he’d let me drive this thing for half a minute, I’d know exactly what’s wrong with it.’ Half the arguments in that house had to do with Green’s wanting to drive the truck. ‘Right here on the property, that’s all,’ he would say. ‘No big deal.’ The other arguments had to do with his disappearance. It made the Old Man crazy.

On the mountain road to follow a deer path, lying on the bottom of the rowboat drifting along searching for the kingfisher, gone somewhere, and dragging me along with him. One night at dinner the Old Man had dropped the box in my lap: tan leather, with dozens of pencils inside, points sharp and perfect, in every color you could imagine, a thick pad of paper, erasers, a pencil sharpener. I had picked up one of the pencils: French Blue, a soft color that was almost purple.

‘I love this,’ I told him. I had wanted to throw my arms around him, wanted to tell him I had never had a present like this before, no one had. I wanted to tell him but did not tell him; I ducked my head, my bangs a fringe over my eyes. But he knew; I knew he knew.

The Old Man was an artist, but a different kind. He drew circles, lines, and squares that turned into plans for houses and buildings. He said he wished he could do what I did. Now Green is flying around the side of the truck like one of Izzy’s hens, his eyeglasses taped to the side of his head, his hands filthy from the truck.

‘Move it, Kristen Copses,’ he said. ‘We don’t have all day here, you know.’ I put the mountain picture carefully inside the box. At the end of the summer, I would give it to the Old Man as a present. Do not think about the end of the summer, I told myself. Green and I raced each other down the road, across the bridge, dead tie, and stopped, out of breath, at the mountain road. After a moment we started up.

Green lurched along. At one turn in the road, he was all speed; the next he would stop short, bent over, nose almost touching the ground. ‘Look at this, Holly, it’s a raccoon print,’ he would say, or ‘See the way this branch is cut off? Beaver, building a den where the stream comes off the mountain.’ The Old Man was right about the road: It was slippery, muddy in the shade, one side ready to slide off the mountain straight into the river. But worth it.

It was Monday afternoon. Kristen put on her sunglasses, her Eddie Dillon sailor hat, stuck a Gertz lipstick in each pocket of her shorts, and her notebook under one arm. It was a beautiful day, a perfect day, and she had something perfect to do.

Detective.

They could not watch for ships that night. Mr.

Colgan had borrowed Gram's rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr.

Meyer was caulking at the bottom of his.

'Want to go to the movie instead?' Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths' porch.

'Well...'

'We won't stay for the whole thing,' she told him. 'We'll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and...' She tried to remember the newest movie at Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking into the sunshine.

'How much does it cost?' he asked.

'Not a cent. I told you, we are sneaking in.' She could see he looked worried. 'Unless you're afraid.'

'I am not afraid of anything.'

'Well, then.' Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of raisin rings. **SOMEONE TALKED**, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

‘It’s hot as poker on the balcony,’ she told him. ‘They always leave the door open up there.’

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they would have to climb.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said, knowing what he was thinking.

‘Don’t look down.’

‘It must be two stories,’ he said. ‘You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.’

‘Three stories,’ she said, daring him.

‘I am not afraid,’ he said. ‘I am just telling you.’

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn’t you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up occasionally?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

‘Race you to the top,’ she said.

He opened his eyes. ‘Sure.’

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. ‘That was so simple,’ he said.

She leaned over. ‘We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.’

He grinned back. ‘What is up, Doc?’ He spoke.

She started to laugh.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It is your voice. It sounds so... so...’

‘Hungarian,’ he said. ‘It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.’

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut cheese. If she tried it now-that is, if she had still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on too little pieces of wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman’s bakery.

And she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mail carrier that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy... makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she did not watch anymore.

Noah was not watching either.

‘Don’t you like the movie?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

‘We could leave-’ she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs and the beam from the matron’s flashlight bouncing up toward them.

‘I was on a ship like that,’ Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he got here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

‘Tom,’ Kristen began.

‘Are you here again?’ the matron asked. ‘I told you last time it is dangerous to climb those steps, and you cannot keep coming in here when you do not pay. It was one thing when you were six years old, but...’

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee’s light she could see Tom’s face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

‘It’s nine o’clock,’ she said. ‘Gram is going to have a fit’

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman’s. ‘Same cookies,’ Noah said, breathless, and then around the corner of the As Good as New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute, and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah was not crying anymore. They were both laughing, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

‘Tomorrow,’ Kristen called after him. ‘See you tomorrow.’

Kristen had been wandering around all yesterday and today, trying to get another look at Tom. She wore the sailor hat Eddie Dillon had given her last summer, her sunglasses, and a thick layer of Victory Red lipstick from Gertz Department Store,

FREE TAKE ONE. Noah would not recognize her in a hundred years.

It did not make any difference. Once she thought she saw him climbing around on the rock jetties at the beach, and once on Cross Bay Boulevard. But both times he was gone by the time she got close enough for a good look.

Right now, it was Friday afternoon, late, and Poppy was finally coming for the weekend. In the rowboat, Kristen dipped the oars into the water as quietly as she could. Any minute Gram would be after her to practice the piano, Etude in Something or Other, set the table for dinner, and who knew what else.

(RIDGWAY 1944)

Kristen received three and a half presents for her birthday that Monday. Two were books, one was a secret, and the last was a half-eaten candy bar.

Lynnnatta Dillon gave her the candy, a Milky Way. The end of the wrapper was torn back, and teeth marks dented the chocolate.

‘I stole it,’ Lynnnatta said. ‘Stole it for you, and kept thinking about it, and my mouth watered, and I just couldn’t-’

‘-resist,’ said Kristen.

‘Right.’ Lynnnatta grinned. ‘A tiny bite.’

Kristen took the Milky Way by the wrapped end and slid it into her pocket. She was dying to wipe her fingers off her skirt, but she could not hurt Lynnnatta’s feelings.

Kristen followed Lynnnatta and her two cats up the baseboard steps to the Dillons’ attic. It was the only stand-up attic in Ridgway Beach, a perfect place to look out the window and see what was going on all over the place. Most of the other summer houses had tiny crawl spaces, and Gram’s house, over on the bayside, did not even have that. Gram’s house was built up over the water on stilts, without an attic, or a cellar, or even a bathroom with a real tub.

‘Now, listen.’ Lynnnatta leaned toward her, the freckles on her nose like four dots of pepper. ‘I have a pack of things to tell you and they’re all secret.’

‘I won’t tell,’ Kristen said, feeling the heat of the attic, dying to take a quick peek out the window, to do a little spying on the beach at the end of the street.

‘You have to swear...’ Lynnnatta began.

Outside, the July sky was so blue it almost hurt Kristen’s eyes, and the wind was exactly right, so the beach would be packed.

Spies were sitting there under their striped umbrellas checking on the ships that steamed away from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Lynnnatta's eyes narrowed. '... swear on your aunt Celia's life in Berlin, Germany.'

Kristen swallowed. She thought of her list of problems:

Number 1: Lies, and then the second list, the list of solutions. Right up there on top was the promise not to tell a lie ever again, not even a tiny little one, much less one of those gigantic ones about her aunt being an important U.S. spy against the Nazis.

This was the very last one, she told herself, no matter what.

She closed her eyes and crossed her heart over her white blouse. 'I, Elizabeth Mollahan, promise never to tell your secrets, on my aunt Celia's life.'

'And if you tell,' Lynnnatta said, 'your aunt will probably be caught by the Nazis... not my fault... and they'll make her tell all the secret war stuff and-'

'She would never do that. She is the bravest-' Kristen snapped her teeth together hard before the rest of the lie came out.

Where had her aunt Celia gotten herself to, anyway?

Kristen had not even seen her since she was about four years old.

'She'll be marched out, put up against a wall, and shot just like in-'

'-Fair Stood the Wind for France.' Kristen and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to see it at the Cross-Bay Theatre three times yesterday.

'Right,' said Lynnnatta. 'Now here is the first thing I want to tell you. Come on.'

Lynnnatta ducked around the side of the chimney with Kristen behind her. Overhead, Kristen could hear the drone of one of the trainer planes from the naval base. She would love to watch it circling over the beach, dipping its wings...

'Are you paying attention?' Lynnnatta asked. 'Here I am ready to trust you with all my secrets...'

Kristen sank next to her, taking one of the cats in her lap. 'I am listening. Of course, I am.'

Lynnnatta reached for a paper bag. 'Look.' She held it out.

Inside were about fourteen candy bars... Hershey's, Walnettos, Sugar Daddy lollipops, and even a couple of rolls of assorted LifeSavers.

Kristen's eyes widened. Not counting the dusty case in Mrs. Tannenbaum's stationery store, she had never seen so much candy in her life. She reached out to run her fingers over a roll of Necco wafers. Her mouth was watering. She could see four yellow ones in a row, her favorites...

'Maybe we could take one thing,' Lynnnatta said. 'Just one. My mother is saving all this for my brother Eddie in the army. Now that he is a soldier fighting for his country, he gets everything, and I do not even get a sniff of this stuff. She is going to send it all overseas in this heat. The whole thing will be one big, melted mess.'

Without thinking, Kristen reached for the Necco wafers and began to rip open the paper.

'You like that?' Lynnnatta asked. 'Not me. I am going to have a nut thing. Something with chocolate.'

They sat there, not talking, Kristen crunching down on two yellow Necco wafers, feeling the sweetness in her mouth. 'I hope Eddie won't mind,' she said.

'Listen,' Lynnnatta said, 'there's enough candy here for the whole army.' She stopped. For a moment she looked worried.

'D-Day. I wonder if he was there.'

Kristen had a quick flash of Eddie in her mind, his square front teeth, a little separated, resting gently on his lower lip, his nose red. He always had a cold, was always sniffing even on the hottest day of the summer. What Kristen liked best about Eddie was that she could make him laugh. He always knew when she was telling Lynnnatta a story; he never gave her away.

One time she had told Lynnnatta she had almost seen a murder on Cross Bay Boulevard. A car had screeched to a stop in front of Bohack's at closing time, and the Bohack guy would not let the man in. The man said something about being ready to throttle him, whatever

that meant exactly, but he had gone away two seconds later. Kristen had not mentioned the going away part to Lynnnatta, though.

‘I even heard the police sirens,’ Eddie had said.

‘Yes,’ Kristen had not stopped for a breath. ‘About four police cars. They zeroed right in.’

Eddie Dillon with those square teeth, always ready to laugh. Eddie at Normandy Beach on D-Day? Everyone had talked about it all through the war... the day that the Allies, thousands of Americans, and English men, would land in France to fight their way across Europe.

Kristen had seen the news in the movies, boats coming close to the shore, the water rough as Ridgway on a stormy morning. The forward flaps of the little square boats had come down, and soldiers had waded through water to their waists, while the Germans kept shooting and shooting... She shivered.

‘What is it?’ Lynnnatta asked.

Kristen shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

Lynnnatta fished through the candy. ‘Take one more thing,’ she said. ‘I’m going to try a couple of Walnettos next, and maybe just one butterscotch.’

Kristen finished the Necco wafers and took butterscotch too. At home Gram would never let her buy butterscotch candies.

‘They pull the fillings right out of your mouth,’ she would say.

‘Now the next thing is secret,’ Lynnnatta said, her mouth full. ‘We are moving out of Ridgway until the end of the war. My father has a job in a factory at Willow Run. It is in Detroit, wherever that is, the largest factory in the world. Top secret. We are going to lock the house, board up the windows, and off we go. My mother, my father, me, and even the cats.’ She leaned forward.

‘He is going to make those Liberator bombers. B-24’s.’

Lynnnatta had the best luck in the world, Kristen thought.

But then she thought about the summer without her. ‘When?’ ‘Tomorrow,’ Lynnnatta said. ‘The next day at the latest.’

‘But we were going to...’ Kristen closed her mouth around another butterscotch. It was not so much that they were going to do anything. But Lynnnatta, who lived at the other end of Queens all winter, had no idea that she was a last-row, last-seat kid in school with terrible marks in everything except reading.

Lynnnatta did not know she told lies every other minute. No, she did not know any of that. That is what made her such a perfect friend.

‘I know we were going to do a ton of stuff,’ Lynnnatta said, ‘but this is important, right? My father must help win the war. And you could link up with those kids on Broad Channel...’ Kristen stared out the window. She could not even begin to think about getting herself over to Broad Channel, walking up and down the streets, looking for friends, trying to act like Shirley

Temple, the actor when she saw a kid her age, trying to smile. My name is Kristen Mollahan, la, what is yours? She shuddered, thinking about it.

‘Did you hear something?’ Lynnnatta asked, raising one hand.

Kristen listened a little nervously. It could not be Nazis on such a sunny day. Lynnnatta’s mother is back from the stores?

Lynnnatta shook her head. ‘I guess not.’ She held the box of Walnettos up to her nose and breathed in. ‘Of course, going to Willow Run isn’t quite as good as having an aunt a spy.’

‘No,’ Kristen said.

‘Or a cousin- a general in the navy.’

Kristen tried to look modest. She could not even remember telling Lynnnatta that.

‘I have one more secret. It is another birthday present. It will make you feel better when I am gone.’ Lynnnatta reached under her collar and pulled a key, knotted in a brown shoelace, over her head. ‘This is for you, the back-door key. You can sneak in, come right up to the attic, and write your next five books.’

Kristen took a breath. This place, hers. She would be here by herself, nobody knowing, without Gram telling her to stop reading and get herself outside in the fresh air, without the radio blaring war

news in front of her. She would author a wonderful book, never mind the spelling, never mind Sister Jillen.

She took the key, still warm from Lynnnatta's neck, and looped it under her blouse. 'This is the best present I've ever had.'

'I know it.' Lynnnatta glanced at the brown paper bag.

'And you got the best candy bar. I love those Milky Ways.' 'You're right.' Kristen reached into her pocket and handed it to Lynnnatta. 'Have a bite of this. Have it all.'

Lynnnatta thought for a moment. 'It is only fair. You have the attic, an aunt- a spy, your father going overseas any minute, and you have already written thirteen books.'

'Fourteen...' Kristen began another lie and stopped. 'Poppy is not going overseas. He is not going anywhere.' She shook her head. 'You forgot. He is an engineer. He is important right where he is, working in the city.'

Lynnnatta peeled the paperback off the rest of the candy bar. 'My father said he probably would go this summer.'

Kristen scrambled to her feet. 'Your father's wrong.'

Then she saw Lynnnatta's eyes widen. 'Holy mackerel,'

Lynnnatta said, 'it's my mother.'

Kristen looked over her shoulder. Mrs. Dillon was coming up the attic steps. Kristen could see the top of her headfirst, and then her shoulders.

They scooped the candy back into the bag, Kristen trying to swallow the rest of the butterscotch, which was stuck to her back teeth.

And then Mrs. Dillon was right there, standing in front of them, looking as if she would burst into tears. 'How could you?' she said, looking at Lynnnatta. 'I walked for blocks for that candy, one store after another, this one did not have peppermints, the other did not have Hershey's. There is a war on, no candy...' Mrs. Dillon looked out the window. 'My poor Eddie,' she said.

Kristen edged her way to the stairs, feeling guilty, feeling horrible. 'I think I'd better go home now,' she said using her best manners. 'It was genuinely nice of you to have me over.'

She rushed down the stairs, and as she let herself out the door, she could hear Mrs. Dillon. 'That Mollahan girl is trouble,' she was saying. 'And you're not one bit better.'

Kristen stopped to see if Lynnnatta was going to say anything, but she could not hear a thing. She dug the last of the butterscotch off her back teeth and headed for Grams. The summer certainly was not starting very well, not very well at all.

'I.' Gram's house was the last one on the canal. 'Where the ocean swoops in to fight with the bay,' she always said.

Up on stilts, the house hung over the water. In the living room was a deep, soft couch, a radio on its legs, and, this year, the damn piano taking up the whole sidewall. In the back was a little square kitchen. It had so many pots and pans, and bowls, and dishes, and mixers, and mashers that there was not an inch of room left on the yellow counters. Most of the stuff was dusty.

Gram hated to cook.

The two bedrooms were separated from the kitchen by long flowered curtains. One was Gram's, the other was Poppy's.

Kristen was glad there was not a third bedroom. All summer she slept on the porch that was tacked on the front. She was so close to the water beneath; she could lean over in her bed and watch the silver killers zigzagging along just under the dark surface.

Sometimes she looked up at the Big Dipper, but most of the time, like tonight, she watched the searchlights crisscrossing overhead. She knew the spotters were looking for enemy planes that might come from Germany to bomb New York.

And suppose she was the one to spot a plane and bombs coming down? She thought about it, diving through bombs to rescue the neighbors. She closed her eyes. Germans parachuting into the canal. She would have to grow like crazy, zigzagging away from the bombs, away from the paratroopers. It made her dizzy to think about it.

She listened. Something was going on. Noise. Lights. At Mrs. Meyer's, four houses down. Yes, lights. Mrs. Meyer had not even bothered to pull the blackout curtains, and the Nazis could zero right in with Kristen two seconds away.

And right now, a car was driving up on the roadside of the Smiths' house. Kristen knelt up in bed and leaned against the screen. Never mind that Gram had told her a hundred times she was going to

knock the screen out and go headfirst into the water. 'Mr. Meyer's Model A Ford,' she said aloud. She knew that because she had helped him paint the top half of the headlights black so they could not be seen from the sky. The light Mr. Meyer had painted had turned out much better than the one she had worked on.

Kristen reached for her shorts and sneakers. She would just get herself down there and find out what was going on. She was not one bit sleepy yet, anyway.

Strange that Mr. Meyer was using the last drop of his gas. He had sworn he was going to hold on to it until the day when the war was over in Europe. 'Then you and I, Kristen my love, are going to drive up and down Cross Bay Boulevard,' he had said.

'We'll honk the horn every inch of the way.'

She thought about sneaking out through the kitchen, but Gram would be awake in a flash. Instead, she unhooked the screen and pushed it until it swung out.

Noisy, much too noisy. She counted to fifty, then wiggled through the opening and hung on to the window ledge until she felt the piling with her feet. The rowboat was directly underneath.

She let go and landed on one of the oars.

For a minute she rocked back and forth holding her leg, feeling the pain shooting down her shin. Tomorrow she will have a black-and-blue mark the size of a potato.

The boat was rocking too, water sloshing in over the side.

She could hear Mrs. Meyer's back door opening, and the sound of voices, but they were too far away for her to know what they were saying.

Kristen pulled the thick rope over the hook, setting the boat free. Then she pushed herself along under the porches, moving from piling to piling, not bothering with the oars.

She looked up as she passed slowly under the Colgan's,' the Graves,' the Temples.' Narrow slits of light from the sides of their blackout shades were reflected out onto the water, sliding up and down with the tiny waves.

Under the Smiths' porch, everything was still except for a gentle swish and the boat bumping against the pilings. The voices had stopped.

Kristen sat there shivering, wishing she had brought her sweater. She wondered how long she should stay there. If she boosted herself up on the piling, quietly, carefully, she could grab on to the edge of the porch. The Smiths' porch was a plain open one, not like hers, which had been made into a bedroom. She could tiptoe across it and investigate the kitchen window. She thought about it for a moment.

Gram said her whole trouble was she did not think about things long enough. Of course, she did. She thought all the time about authoring stories, and about the war, and about coming to Ridgway every summer. And she thought about her mother. Hadn't she brought a star every year to paste in the back of her bed so her mother would be there in Ridgway too? Of course, Gram did not know that. That was private stuff; no one knew, not even Poppy. Especially not Poppy. His face would get that soft look, that sad look.

Kristen reached for the dripping rope and looped it over the Smiths' hook. All she needed was for the boat to float away without her. She slid the oars under the seats on one side. One almost broken shin was enough for tonight. Then she pulled herself up, hanging on to the rough floorboards of the porch.

She left a trail of wet sneaker prints going across, but they would be dry before morning. And then she was under the window, and Mrs. Meyer was talking again, talking a blue streak in her high voice, and Mr. Meyer was talking too, a rumble of sound.

Kristen crouched there, listening, catching bits and pieces. 'Budapest... so far away,' Mrs. Meyer was saying, 'but never mind... safe... the beach swimming...' Her voice trailed off.

'Maybe you'd like applesauce,' Mr. Meyer put in. 'Or toast... margarine on it, though... butter's gone...'

'Andrassy Street,' Mrs. Meyer said. 'I remember the cobblestones and Kalocsa's Restaurant...'

'How about toast with applesauce on the side?' Mr. Meyer asked. 'What do you say, Tom?'

Tom? Who was that, now? Kristen leaned back against the house to look at her leg. In the light from the window, she could see it was a mess.

Noah was not talking, not a word. Kristen listened to Mr. Meyer complaining that you had to be a genius to make the can opener work, while Mrs. Meyer kept going on about the beach.

Then Kristen heard her name, clear as a bell. Kristen Mollahan. Tom, whoever he was, was supposed to meet her, and they were going to be friends, Mrs. Meyer was saying.

Kristen knelt up slowly, so slowly it was as if she were swimming underwater. She gripped the edge of the windowsill with the tips of her fingers, then raised her head just high enough to see inside and to hear clearly. And what she heard was Noah saying he did not have time to be friends with any Kristen Mollahan, saying her name in a strange, soft way, with an accent.

‘I have to find Christy,’ he said.

What was he doing there, she wondered, sitting at the table directly across from her, a dish of applesauce in front of him, the skinniest kid she had ever seen in her life? His hair was curly and thick, but it looked as if he had not combed it in a hundred years. She stared at him, his face down in the shadows. A nice face, she thought, even though he did not want to be friends. Too bad for him. She did not want to be friends either.

He was wearing shorts, and his knees were big and knobby under the table, his legs like sticks. Then he looked up. His eyes were blue, the bluest she had ever seen, and he was looking straight into her eyes. He picked up his spoon, a little applesauce dripping off the edge, and, still staring, pointed it at her.

She could feel the heat in her face, and her neck. Mr. and Mrs. Meyer were turning toward the window, trying to see what he was looking at outside. Kristen scrambled across the porch on her knees, and down over the edge, hanging on for a second, landing in the boat, grabbing the rope off the hook as fast as she could. She pushed herself back down under the porches so quickly she could hear the water churning up in the back of her.

She did not stop until she was in her bed with the red quilt pulled up to her chin. She lay there thinking about Tom-his blue eyes staring at her-and wondering who Christy was. She could not believe she had been caught like that, sneaking around on the Smiths’ porch in the middle of the night.

Too late.

Above her, the screen door opened.

Kristen began to row, singing, ‘ ‘Mairzy doats...’

‘Pretending she hadn’t heard.’

Gram was not fooled. ‘You could set the table, Kristen.’ she called, ‘get everything ready before your father comes.’

‘Going to pick him up in the boat right now,’ Kristen said over her shoulder. ‘Then he won’t have to walk around the long way.’

‘And what about the piano?’

Gram was in love with that piano.

‘Did you practice?’ Gram began.

‘This morning.’ She had not bothered much with the étude, she had done the C scale twice, two minutes, and that was that. She began to sing again, ‘A kiddish divvy too,’ ‘listening for the sound of the door, but it did not close. Gram was still standing there, waiting for her to turn around and come back.

Kristen raised the oars, water plinking off the ends, but Gram did not say anything.

‘Going to get Poppy,’ she said again.

In the back of her, the screen door closed.

Kristen dipped the oars into the water again, veering toward the railway station, hurrying now, anxious to see him.

The railroad trestle looped across the bay, flat against the water. Kristen bent over the oars, wondering what Poppy would tell her about on the way back... how hot it was in St. Paul’s and how much he missed her. She smiled to herself, thinking about it.

She saw the smoke from the engine before she spotted the train. A moment later, it pulled into the station, and a knot of people piled out the doors. And there was her father, waving his newspaper at her. She waved back, rowing fast toward the dock, watching the distance narrow, angling around another boat that was coming in to meet the train. Then finally she rammed into the rough wood of the piling. She held the boat steady, stroking, until Poppy untied his shoes, pulled them off, and hopped in.

‘Want to row?’ she asked, leaning across for his kiss.

He shook his head, smiling, the lines around his eyes crinkling. She reached out to touch them with her fingers.

‘Go the long way,’ he said, ‘around the trestle.’

She knew Gram was waiting, broiling flounder, using the last dot of butter for little round potatoes, but she was so happy to be there with him, she did not say anything.

She dipped the oars into the water, pulling slowly, evenly, watching him. He tipped his hat back and closed his eyes. ‘This is my favorite place,’ he said. ‘It’s home, even though it’s only for the summer.’

Kristen nodded. Tomorrow they would line up at the deep-sea fishing dock, to climb aboard the Mary L. before the sun came up.

They would fish all day, the boat smelling of kerosene and heat.

Tomorrow night, she and Poppy will walk to the Cross-Bay Theatre. He loved the movies too. It would be her fourth time for Fair Stood the Wind for France, first time paying. Then on Sunday, after Mass, they had read, finished Evangeline, or...

‘I have to tell you...’ Poppy’s eyes were open now, blue with paler flecks of gray, his face suddenly serious.

‘The Dillons left for Detroit,’ she said quickly. ‘Mr. Dillon is going to be a supervisor in a factory in charge of making planes.’

Top secret, Lynnnatta says.’

Poppy grinned. ‘It won’t be top secret for long, not if Lynnnatta knows about it.’

Kristen swallowed, watching him smile.

He reached out, put his hand on the oars. ‘I must go too.’

I came tonight to tell you.’

She did not look at him. ‘To a factory like the Dillons? When would we leave?’

She looked out across the water, seeing him shake his head from the corner of her eye.

‘The army needs engineers,’ Poppy said.

For a moment she felt as if she could not breathe. 'Who's going to take care of me?'

'Gram,' he said. 'Gram, of course.'

Gram. She closed her mouth over the word, did not want to hear it. She and Gram all alone in St. Paul's this winter, the wind rattling around the house.

'Please,' she said, but she did not even know if she had said it aloud.

Poppy put his hand over hers. 'Listen. People are being killed just for disagreeing with the Nazis or being Jewish.'

'I'm sick of the war,' she said.

'It's going to be over someday,' he said, 'now that the Allies have landed in France.'

She shook her head. 'It'll take forever.'

Poppy sighed. 'There's been nothing but destruction in this war, families separated, villages ruined, cathedrals bombed...' She opened her mouth, trying to think of something to say, something that would change his mind.

'But right behind the armies will be people like me,' he said. 'The engineers, the builders. We are the ones who will help put Europe back together again.'

'Where will you go? When...'

He shook his head. 'It could be anywhere. England or Germany.'

'I won't even know where you are.'

'Yes, you will,' he said.

Kristen shook her head. 'Mrs. Colgan does not know where her brother is. She said the censors cross everything out in the letters. She cannot even guess what country.'

Poppy squeezed her hand. 'That is true. But I promise I will find a way to let you know, somehow.'

Gram was calling now. She could hear her voice across the water. 'Jerry, Kristen. hurry.'

‘I love you, Kristen. ‘Poppy said. ‘I love you more than Ridgway. More than anything.’

Kristen edged the boat toward the dock. Gram was outside, her hand cupped over her eyes, watching for them.

‘What will Gram say?’ Kristen asked. ‘She will not like it.

She will hate it. I know she will.’

Poppy moved his hand, held it over Kristen’s wrist on the oar. ‘Gram knows.’

Kristen stared at him. ‘You told Gram first. You knew about it. Both of you keeping a secret... not telling me...’

She shook his hand off her wrist, feeling tears hot in her eyes, a terrible burning in her throat, feeling angry enough to burst. She hated him, hated Gram.

She started to grow.

‘Kristen.’ her father began, then stopped.

She nosed the boat under the porch, banging hard into the piling. She must have chipped a piece of paint off the boat, a couple of pieces. She did not care, did not care about one thing.

Poppy reached out to help her up, but she pulled away from him.

Gram was standing at the edge of the ramp that led to the kitchen, smiling a little, looking anxious at the same time. ‘You told her? I thought you were going to wait until after-’

‘Mind your business,’ Kristen said and said it again. The words came out of her mouth so fast; they ran together. Then she ran up the path, away from the house. She wanted to go back to the water, but she would have to pass them. Instead, she went along the road, running on the tar, which was gluey from today’s sun. She saw Noah and veered away from him, but she knew he had seen her too. He was standing in front of the Smiths’ house, watching her cry.

The next day, as soon as it was light, Kristen was out the door, barefoot, heading for Lynnnatta’s house. Peeling shutters covered the windows on the boat Noah floor, winter shutters. She could hear the radio next door, the newscaster talking about the American army caught on the beaches in Normandy: two hundred thousand soldiers

waiting to set Paris free. Was that all anyone thought about-news and the war?

Without looking, Kristen slipped the key out from under her collar. She did not bother to pull the shoelace over her head. She leaned forward. The key fit easily into the lock, the door sliding open under her fingers, and she was inside in a moment.

She wandered into the living room. It was darker than the kitchen in there, the winter shutters tighter on the windows. Still, shafts of light fell across the rug, and the couch, and Eddie's picture on the end table.

She picked up the picture, seeing Eddie's smile, his buck teeth, his boots laced nervously, his cap pushed back over his frizzy hair. She thought of Poppy, and how he would look in a uniform.

She set the picture back in the same spot. How strange it seemed without Lynnnatta, or even Mrs. Dillon sitting next to the radio listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen went up the attic stairs, listening to the sound of her feet, and pushed up the window.

The waves were high today. No one was on the boardwalk except a gray gull sitting on the railing, its feathers puffed out over its skinny legs. The legs reminded her of someone, but she could not think of who it was.

Mary L. was still at the dock, sitting low in the water. If only she would see Poppy in line with the other fishers. He would be balancing the picnic basket and tackle box; he would have his fishing rod and hers too.

She felt a terrible lump in her throat. He was packed by now, having breakfast, ready to take the morning train back to the city. And she would not be there to say goodbye.

He had told her about the train last night when she had finally gone home. He had sat on the edge of her bed, his weight tilting the mattress down, telling her the war would be over some time and they would be right back there in Ridgway with everything just the same.

She had not said a word. She had acted as if she did not care, not one bit.

Now she swallowed hard over the lump in her throat. She was not going back. She would stay in the attic all morning, all day, reading a book or something. She wished she could stay there forever.

She took deep breaths of the cool air that was coming in. And, leaning over, she saw Tom. He was alone on the beach, wearing a pale green shirt and shorts. Holding up the shorts was a belt... a ridiculous belt that was miles too big for him.

‘Ah,’ she said aloud. That is what the seagull reminded her of. Tom. He had the same skinny legs with fat knees. He was walking back and forth, shading his eyes with his hands, turning toward her.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ she said under her breath. She ducked away from the window; walking doubled over to the back of the chimney.

Poor Eddie’s candy was gone, bag and all. Only the Milky Way wrapper was left, over in the corner crumpled in a ball.

Kristen looked closer. A piece of paper was lying on the floor. She sank and picked it up, a note from Lynnnatta.

Do not worry, Kristen. I am coming back. Good luck to your Aunt C in Berlin, Germany. I will not tell anyone.

M.D.

And taped to them but Noah was a LifeSaver, a red one, Kristen’s favorite color.

Kristen leaned back against the rough chimney bricks, sucking on the LifeSaver wondering if Poppy’s train had left.

She stood up suddenly, so quickly she felt dizzy. Then she was out of the attic, clattering down the stairs, through the hall, through the kitchen, and out the door, listening to the sound of the train. She did not stop to see whether anyone had seen her.

It was too late to get to the station. Instead, she ran across the field to the viaduct over the water, trying to find enough breath to get her there ahead of the train. She began to wave as soon as she heard it on the tracks, even before she saw it. She did not stop until it was a smudge in the distance, and then gone completely, even though she knew Poppy could not have seen her.

‘Yes,’ he said, going down toward the Smiths.’

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen. 'I was just getting a little worried,' she said.

'I was with Tom,' Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. 'Good. I am glad.'

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan's Victory Garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother's stars passed in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

That Noah person had been ducking around all over the place yesterday, here one minute, there the next, always one step ahead of her, one step ahead of the police.

She had thought the whole thing over. Noah could be a Nazi spy... not a chance-in-a-million spy-like Mr. Egan, but a real one. She counted it out on her fingers, talking to herself as she marched down the block. One, he had come in the middle of the night; two, he had a foreign spy accent, and three, she could not keep track of him.

As soon as she turned the corner, she stopped to put on a slash of Victory Red lipstick. She was getting good at it, not so much on her teeth anymore, or extra around her mouth. At least she hoped not; there were no mirrors on the way to the beach. She smacked her lips, a little sore from all that rubbing off lipstick before she went home every day.

Then she heard footsteps across the street. She looked back. A miracle. It was from Tom. She ducked behind the mailbox to watch him. It looked as if he was heading for the beach.

She let him get a half-block ahead of her, up the boardwalk steps and down the other side; then she followed along after him.

Instead of taking the steps, she scooted underneath the boardwalk and sank back behind the rusty wire fence to see where he went.

He was carrying something, a big wad of stuff. He passed about two inches in front of her, another miracle that he did not see her, and stopped. What was he up to?

He unrolled the lump, a beach blanket, one of Mrs. Meyer's. She had seen it in the washing line a hundred times, so there was not anything very suspicious there. He sat down and lined up a

bottle of Coke, a bag of something-sandwiches or a foreign spy radio maybe-and a pad of paper and a pencil. Then he settled himself on the blanket, just sitting there looking out at the water, his bony knees up to his chin.

It was a good thing she did not have anything to do. She could sit there if he did. She certainly was not going to hang around Gram's house. She had hardly talked to Gram since the night before Poppy left. She took a breath. Do not think about Poppy. Think about Gram instead.

'We are going all the way to the top?' I drew in my breath. Did I want to do that, stand on top of the mountain, a mountain of trouble myself? Green shook his head. 'Pop would have a fit.' He ran his hand over an imaginary beard. 'The rocks fall, Green's, use your head,' he said in the Old Man's voice. Halfway up was a spot that widened. We looked down and saw the house, and Izzy picking tomatoes, and we whistled at her until she waved, even though she could not see us. Then we sank on a rock and Green's fished in his pocket for a squished Hershey bar.

'Should I give you half?' he asked. 'You're not as big as I am.'

'Give me all,' I told him, laughing. 'I'm more deserving.'

He held up both pieces, squinting. 'The Old Man would say that.' I knew that. Somehow the Old Man thought I was a great kid. How had that happened? I swallowed, thinking of the lemon lady: 'You want tough?' she had said. 'I'll show you though.' And someone else, I didn't even remember who it was: 'You've missed school half the term, how do you think you can get away with all this?' But I was a new person with the Old Man, with Izzy, with Green's. It was as if the angry Kristen were seeping right out of my bones, leaving chocolate as soft as that sticky Hershey bar. I looked at Green is, wondering if he minded that the Old Man thought I was great.

But Green was splitting the candy bar, and he gave me the bigger piece but did it quickly. I was not supposed to know. I took a breath. I thought about the W picture in my backpack: the mother, the father, the brother, the sister. And do not think of that, either I told myself.

Kristen counted the days on her fingers It was time for St. Paul's, time for the sixth grade and Sister Sara. It was time to say goodbye to Tom.

They had sent the letter to Poppy two weeks ago, she and Tom, both writing together, trying not to blot the tissue-thin paper. Noah had shown her the creased scrap of cardboard with spidery black writing before he copied it carefully:

Christy Meyer, Maison-Mère Filles de la Sagesse, Rue de la Santé, Paris. 'We can't count on it,' Kristen had told him. 'Maybe I'm wrong, maybe Poppy's not in France.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I know.'

She did not mean it, though. She knew Poppy was there. She was sure of it. And she kept remembering what he had said in the rowboat. 'Right behind the armies will be people like me.'

We are the ones who will help put Europe back together again.'

Find Christy...

For the first time, Kristen paid attention to the war.

Mrs. Hailey lent them a huge map of France. They hung it in Gram's kitchen and tried to guess how long it would take the Allies to get from Cherbourg to Caen, to Rouen, and last to Paris. And as Kristen moved her finger slowly from one city to another, she could almost feel Poppy there.

In the meantime, they swam and fished. Noah caught a skate and a sea robin and put them gently back into the water.

Kristen caught a fluke once and, for the first time, a flounder.

And then on Tuesday, they argued. They did not speak to each other for three days, and all because of the new movie at the Cross-Bay Theatre.

'I am not climbing those stairs,' Noah had said. 'I am paying money, and I am walking in through the front door. I am not a thief.'

'I don't have money,' Kristen had said.

'I will lend-'

'No'

‘I will give-’

‘No.’ She did not know why she was so stubborn, why she was so angry with him. She spent two afternoons in the rowboat by herself before he appeared again at the dock.

‘I have come to swim,’ he said at last.

‘So, swim,’ she said. ‘You don’t need me.’ But she was pulling the rowboat in, ready to put on her bathing suit and go with him.

‘I’m not a thief either,’ she told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

They started along Cross Bay Boulevard, waving to Mrs. Sherman, who was sweeping her walk across the street.

‘Well, all right.’ Kristen spoke as if Noah had said something. ‘I will pay. I will save my money this winter, and next summer...’ She bit her lip and glanced at him. She knew he would be thinking the same thing. Would he come back next summer?

Would he ever come back?

‘I know why you were angry,’ he said. ‘When people go away...’

She nodded. ‘Yes.’

They had just passed the As Good as New Shoppe when the door banged open in the back of them. ‘Mrs. Sherman called Mr. Rowley. ‘The radio. Turn it on. The news. Paris is free.’

Across the street, Mrs. Sherman flung out her arms. ‘Free.’

Her face was turned up in the sky. ‘That beautiful city-’

‘They’re going to keep going now,’ said Mr. Rowley, ‘those soldiers of ours, right to Germany.’

Kristen stopped walking. Next to her Noah had stopped too.

‘Free,’ she whispered.

The mail carrier rounded the corner. 'Have you heard the news?' he called. 'It is the first stage of failure. Next summer we will have lights on the boardwalk, and the guys will be home.'

Films of Kristen Deniel

'Company's coming,' Gram said. I looked up from my pad.

I was drawing a picture of a boat I had seen at Gram's canal: white with thin blue lines of trim, the name in script on the back, Danbar-J, and the captain hosing down the deck. I could not remember what he looked like, so I sketched on his back, bent over, a watch cap on his head.

'Who's coming?' I asked, but Gram had pattered away down the hall, with Henry following her.

'It's Monday, right?' she called back. 'It is,' I said, squiggling the pencil for shadow.

'The movie is closed. My cousin Beatrice is coming on Mondays.' She smiled. 'I forgot. You do not know that.'

Remember, Beatrice had a lingering cold?

Ah, I thought. A lingering cold. Perfect for my next absence note. I looked around the kitchen. 'Not much to eat in here.'

She came back into the kitchen, a thin line of red on her lips. 'Ah, but Beatrice brings dinner. Wait and see. It will be ...' She patted her lips together.

12

Films of Kristen Deniel Every night we ate soup from a can, Gram, Henry, and I. We sat at the table under a stained-glass lamp that tossed rainbows onto the kitchen ceiling. On the wall was a quick picture of Henry I had drawn. He was wearing boxing gloves and batting at the light cord.

Gram whittled away on a slice of wood as we dunked bits of donuts or slice-and-bake chocolate chip cookies into the tomato soup. On Gram's check days we ate big.

They went into the kitchen, the three of them, Gram sliding the teakettle onto the stove as soon as they were in the door. 'Change your clothes, Kristen. 'She said, 'and find something of your father's that Noah can wear.'

And twenty minutes later, they were huddled around the table, hair damp, but wearing dry clothes, with Gram's knitted afghans around their shoulders.

'It was my fault,' Kristen said slowly. 'I told him we could get a ship to Europe. And he was trying...'

'Oh, Kristen. 'Gram said.

Tom's eyes were on her. 'I never really thought we could go. It was a dream. A dreamlike thinking someone will find Christy...' He sighed. 'I just wanted to see the ships one more time. I wanted to think about the ships going to Christy.'

Kristen nodded, thinking that she had dreamed the same thing, going to Poppy, finding Poppy.

'When I started, it was not even raining. I just row so slowly...' he said. 'I would not have gone without you.' He shook his head. 'And now I have lost the boat.'

'And we might have lost you both.' Gram scraped back her chair. 'Don't you know that this is what it is all about?'

Nagymamma is sending you and Christy away from her, so would you be safe? And your parents publishing a newspaper, helping to win the war, so you would have a good life?'

'For me? My mother and father?' Noah was nodding. 'I have never thought about that. I have just never thought...'

Gram turned to Kristen. 'And Poppy, who could have stayed right here... He went for you, Kristen. and I had to let him go. My son.' She turned her head a little. 'It was so hard.'

Gram did not say anything else for a moment. She looked like she was stern, frowning a little. But then she put her hand on

Kristen's cheek. 'But worth it. Worth the price to keep you safe.' Before Kristen could say anything, Gram pushed back the flowered curtains and went into her bedroom. 'I have something for you, Tom.' She came back carrying a blue case.

'From the window,' Kristen said, realizing. 'From the As Good as New Shoppe.'

Gram smiled. 'I'll have to swap fish every week for this violin for the next two summers.'

And Noah was reaching for the violin, running his hands over the case, then snapping it open to look at the shiny wood and pluck the strings.

‘I know about Nagymamma,’ Gram said. ‘I know she’d want this for you.’

But by this time the violin was under Tom’s chin. For a moment he tightened the strings, his head turned to the side. Then the kitchen was filled with the sound of a Hungarian song, fast, and sharp, and beautiful.

And Gram was nodding. ‘See, Kristen. ‘She said, ‘if you’d only practice...’

And at that moment, Kristen remembered Poppy’s letter.

Give Gram a big hug. She loves you more than you know.

She sat back; glad Gram was there in the kitchen instead of far away like Nagymamma. She listened to Noah playing, his head bent over the violin, his fingers moving on the strings, as the sound of the rain grew less and then stopped altogether, and in the window, she could see a pale, late sun edge the horizon.

‘This one, this waltz,’ Noah said, ‘is Nagymamma’s favorite.’

But before he had played more than two or three notes, Kristen remembered something else. ‘Good grief,’ she said, ‘my library book.’

‘The book in the rowboat?’ Noah asked. ‘It must be soaking wet.’

‘Come on, Tom,’ she said. ‘We must get it out of there, dry it off, something. And we must look for Pap.’

They left Gram with her tea, and as Kristen went out the door, she turned back to see Noah leaning over Gram at the table, kissing her cheek. ‘Grannie,’ he said.

Then Kristen was down in the boat, with four inches of water at the bottom, handing it up to him. ‘Mrs. Hailey will have a fit,’ she said. ‘She said it was a lovely book.’

Noah looked at it, water dripping from the edges, the dye running. 'I know this book,' he said. 'I have read it in school. It is about the French Revolution, a million years ago.'

Kristen raised her hand. 'Tom,' she said. She sank onto the wet seat, her feet sloshing in the water. 'Oh, Tom. The French Revolution. I know where my father is.'

She looked up. 'He has been trying to tell me all these weeks.'

Madeline and The Three Musketeers. Roland, the French hero. All in France. That is why he sent me to Mrs. Hailey. He knew she would tell me there was not a book called The Promise.'

Noah was frowning. He did not know what she was talking about.

'His promise, Tom. That is what he meant. He promised I would know where he was, that he would tell me without the censors knowing. It took me all this time.'

And she began to smile, because Noah looked so silly standing on the dock with Gram's pink afghan over his shoulders and the dripping book in one hand, and because she knew where Poppy was. And then she remembered war news, and all the men who were being killed as the army tried to fight its way across France.

Let Poppy be all right, she thought.

'We shouldn't do this,' I told her as we trundled home a cartload of donuts, a case of cat food, and our check-day treat: a gallon of cherry vanilla ice cream and enough Snickers bars to keep us chewing for a week of television nights. 'We should spread it out.'

Gram did not answer. She hummed a scrap of an old song I had never heard before. That is the way she talked sometimes. She would start with bits of this and that, it could even be poetry. You had to untangle her words in your head like balls of knotted string. And sometimes she would break off in the middle of a sentence, small frown lines on her forehead.

I knew something the hot cocoa woman did not know, something even Emmy, star of the agency, had not guessed. Gram forgot things, forgot words, forgot what she was doing. Not all the time, but still too often. Gram knew it too. She would look at me helplessly, hands in the air, and then I would rush to finish her sentence

for her or to turn down the flame under a pot of soup that was ready to boil over.

‘My cousin Beatrice is waiting,’ she sang one night and handed me my jacket. She gave her straw hat a twirl as she passed the hook it hung on in the hall. ‘Much too cold for this.’

‘Where are we going?’ I asked.

‘To the movies.’

‘What will we use for money?’

Gram did not answer. She pulled a brown hat out of the closet and stood in the mirror, arranging the veil in front of her eyes. In the dim light of the hall, she looked young; her skin seemed to glow.

She saw me staring at her, and for the barest second before, I looked away, I could see that her eyes gleamed. ‘Wait a minute.’ She reached out and gently took my arm, so I stood in front of the mirror.

I did not much like to look at myself; there was that scar just healed from the accident on Old Man’s Mountain. If I had not seen the scar, I did not have to think about that night and the terrible sound of the truck slamming into the rocks as we slid toward the edge.

Gram took the brown hat off her head and put it on mine. She fluffed out the veil, so it covered my face down to my nose and then she stood back.

I drew my breath at the reflection. No scar, no freckles, and my sandy hair, which usually poked out in all directions, looked soft, almost curly. I looked different, ... Pretty was not even the word.

‘Ah,’ Gram said. ‘You know it too. This is the way you are going to look very soon. This is the way you will look for the rest of your life. You have a beautiful face.’

I swallowed. I did not want to take the hat off. I wanted to leave it on forever.

‘Wear it.’ She patted my shoulder, then opened the closet door to take out another hat for herself, a green wool one with flecks of gold and an iridescent clip on one side. She smiled at me.

‘It’s yours to have forever, even when you leave me.’

‘I won't leave,’ I said.

She started to say something, but instead fiddled with the lock on the front door and dropped the key into her pocketbook. As we went past the garage, she shook her head regretfully. The gas gauge was on Empty-I had seen that the other day- and we had about forty cents to last us until the middle of the month.

I sighed. I had money Gram did not know about. I always had money; I called it my running money. It could not be used for gas or food, just running. I had made that bargain with myself a long time ago.

We rushed along in the misty rain for a couple of blocks; then Gram stepped into the middle of the street, her head up, her hands out. ‘Look.’

I put my head back to see fine sleet dropping from the dark sky, streaks of white light.

How would I draw that? I wondered. Black paper, if I could get my hands on some, with white tempera, or the palest gray with a sable brush.

Behind us, a horn blared, a loud, frightening sound. Gram grabbed my hand, and we darted out of the street. Strange to feel someone's hand holding mine. The last time was Izzy's. ‘I always wanted a daughter,’ she had said, hands out. ‘Babies, children.

Piles of them.’

Gram and I made right turns at the next three corners. Then in front of us was the Island Theater, with small lights, blurred in the mist, that ran around the marquee.

An old woman sat at the ticket counter. Not as old as Gram, but still her hair was a bundle of braided cotton candy on top of her head, and when she smiled her teeth were butter yellow. Her thumb pointed at me. ‘What's her name, Gram?’

‘Kristen.’ Gram waved her hand at the woman. ‘This is Beatrice Gilcrest, my cousin and best lifetime friend, not counting Henry.’

‘Gorgeous,’ Beatrice told Gram, and it took me a moment to realize she meant me. She leaned forward. ‘I would have seen you sooner, much sooner, but I've had a miserable cold.’ She winked at me. ‘I didn't want to spread my germs around.’

We smiled at each other; then without paying Gram and I tiptoed past her and went inside.

I peered at the dark theater that stretched out in front of us. Almost no one else was there. It was a school night, and everyone was home, I guess, still having supper, doing homework. It gave me a strange feeling. I thought about Green's at the dinner table with Izzy and the Old Man or bent over a sheet of paper working on algebra.

'We have to work to pay our way,' Gram said, leading me to the candy counter. She turned on the lights, poured a pile of corn and a cup of what looked like parsley into the popcorn machine, then sat back on a high stool behind the counter. 'Special recipe, this popcorn.' She nodded. 'Beatrice and I dreamed it up last winter.'

Gram pointed it up. 'Beatrice lives upstairs. Her apartment takes up the whole top. It is like a bowling alley.' She shook her head. 'Can you imagine?'

I nodded, reaching for a kernel of popcorn. It tasted better than it looked.

I had to laugh, thinking about Henry in boxing gloves fighting for me. My main concern about Henry was how to keep out of his way. I stepped back as he jumped into the car and hopped across the backseat to sit on the rear window ledge, his head up, one notched ear forward, his whiskers twitching.

But I did not have time to think about that. I slid into the car as Gram backed out of the garage and down the driveway in one great swoop and, never looking, barreled onto the street.

You would not believe this; I told Green was in my head and grabbed the edge of my seat with both hands.

Gram began to talk, glancing down at her movie-star hands, long and thin, her nails painted fire-engine red but chipping here and there. I wanted to tell her to slow down but bit my lip instead.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time we reached the first crossing. But by the second corner, I realized there was not that much traffic, and the few cars on the road stayed well out of our way, so I began to relax and listen to what she was saying. 'Going to stay and have yourself done up in a tree?' she asked. 'Stay longer and I will teach you how to drive. Like movies? We can do that, too.'

My mouth went dry. How to drive? That is what Green would say. You could tell her a story about that, couldn't you?

I brushed at the air, wanting to brush him out of my head. I was trying to think of what illness I would give myself today when the Silver Bullet turned another corner and stopped. Spread out in front of us was a canal with a few fishing boats, kerosene trails sliding out in the back of them on the water, and beyond the boats, beyond the canal, was more water than I had ever seen.

Kristen could not see light in any of the houses along the row, not even glimpses from the edges of the blackout curtains.

Everyone was gone, it seemed. Gram would not be home for an hour, and the Smiths were shopping, caught somewhere in the rain.

A moment later, she slid down the ramp into the rowboat and began to row toward the marshes. Another bolt of lightning lit the bay, and beneath the seat in the stern, she could see something almost hidden against the anchor. It was Pap, small and wet, shivering, terrified.

There was no time to take her back, no time to dry her. She would have to stay there huddled under the seat until later until Kristen persuaded Noah to come back.

He had not promised he would not try it, but she thought she had convinced him. How could he have thought he could do it alone, she thought, in a storm like this?

The bay was rough with whitecaps, and the rain, pelting the water, slanted toward her, pushed by the wind. She was soaked through, her hair hanging in strings, dyeing from her shorts running blue over her legs.

A puddle of water was gathering at the bottom of the boat. She knew she should scoop it out with the old coffee can they kept for bailing, but there was not time for it either. She kept her eyes focused on the marshes so the lightning would show her how far Noah had gone.

She was lucky he was a poor rower... unlucky that in the center of the bay the waves were beginning to rise so high that the boat dropped steeply at times, and the oars did not hit the water with every stroke.

She could not stop thinking of Poppy telling her that someday the war would be over, and everything would be the same. She could not imagine it. And she did not even know where Poppy was.

That last night on the boat he had promised her he had let her know.

Promised!

Something tugged in her mind, and then it was gone.

She was across the bay past the marshes she could not see, and across the channel. The pull of the sea was much stronger now, and as she looked back, she could not see the entrance to the bay anymore, even though she was just a few strokes away. For a moment she could see the misty beams of the tall lights on the boardwalk; then they hid again as the rowboat slid into the trough of a wave.

Then, above the sound of the rain and the waves, Kristen heard another sound, the sound of a motor. A small boat, she thought, a fishing boat, or a cutter, and nearby. The sound was comforting. She did not feel so alone, even though she could not see it.

And just ahead of her was Tom. He had heard the sound too. In the next lightning flash, she could see him turn, looking over his shoulder.

‘Wait,’ she called. ‘It is not a ship, not a troopship. Do not, Tom...’

He could not hear her, but in another flash, he saw her, she was sure. And the rest of it seemed to be in slow motion. The next wave was so swollen, so tremendously high, that it pulled his boat up, and up, and the boat poised there on the crest for an instant, motionless. She could see him clearly, the orange of his life jacket standing out even in the darkness.

Then, as the wave slid out from under the boat, she could see the forward part rising, straight up. Kristen watched it, breathless, as it slid back, and in that second, Noah was tossed into the sea.

She could see the orange life jacket a little longer, but after only seconds a wave pulled her boat in one direction and Noah in another and he disappeared.

She kept calling, kept trying to turn the boat in circles, glancing at the lights on the boardwalk to mark her place, watching for the streaks of lightning to show her where he was.

She veered away from his empty boat, which was spinning first high on a wave, then into the crest. In another flash, she saw him

again, just the quickest glimpse, the orange life jacket, and his dark head above the water.

‘I’m here,’ she yelled, not sure he had heard her, or even seen her, and then another wave came, a mountain of a swell that moved toward them, pushing Noah toward her. Kristen could see him turning toward her, his mouth open. He was gulping water, and she reached out, and by some miracle, her hand hooked around the top of the jacket. She held it, feeling her nails rip, but knowing she would not let go, even if she was pulled out of the boat.

But the wave was past them now, and the water grew calm just for the second he needed to grip the boat and pulled at his jacket with both hands until he tumbled into the boat.

He lay there at the bottom, the water washing over him, taking deep breaths. ‘You promised,’ she wanted to say, even though she knew he had not. But she knew it was her fault, all her fault because of her lies, and she told herself she would never tell another lie if she could just get him back safely.

-And-

Now Noah was up on the seat, briefly raising one shoulder in the air, coughing, and reaching out to touch her hand. Kristen turned the boat back into the bay, rowing toward the houses, watching him trembling with the cold. Finally, she nosed the boat under the porch, the lights on above, and Gram was waiting and watching as Pap, a furious ball of orange fur, streaked out of the boat and up the path away from them.

It moved and rolled, it shimmered, it glowed iridescent silver. The Atlantic Ocean. I itched for a piece of drawing paper.

‘This is my ocean,’ Gram said, as if it belonged to her personally, like one of her hats.

It was the way I felt about the Delaware River. Pain filled my chest as I thought about it. I wanted to sit in the Old Man’s rowboat, to lean over and put my hands into that clear water, to watch the catfish riding along on the bottom, the schools of pickerel lazing in the warm sun.

‘So, what do you think?’ Gram asked.

‘Bigger than a river,’ I said. ‘Rougher.’ I spread out my hands, trying to think of the difference. ‘It’s wonderful, but...’

She waited.

‘You can’t get your arms around it.’

13

Kristen walked down Cross Bay Boulevard. She had been looking for the mail carrier all afternoon. Just then he rounded the corner. ‘I’ve been waiting forever,’ she told him.

‘It’s too hot to walk fast,’ he said. ‘But I have something for you.’ He pulled out a letter.

‘Poppy,’ she said. She took it from him, smiling. She did not wait to open it. She leaned against the window of As Good as New Shoppe to tear open the thin white envelope. Mr. Rowley, the owner, was moving things around. No more straw hats and the violin was gone. Instead, he was dragging a huge moose head to the windowsill. It must be a thousand years old, Kristen thought, and it will be in the window for another thousand.

She looked down at Poppy’s letter, ran her fingers over the handwriting she loved. He did not say much about himself, but about the end of the summer, and Kristen’s going back to St. Paul’s. He asked about how many books she had written.

She looked at the moose’s head. ‘I’ve written about as much as you have,’ she said under her breath. But never mind, there would be plenty of time for that when school began.

She turned the page over. There was more about books.

Poppy wrote about Madeline again, and A Tale of Two Cities. ‘And remember The Promise,’ he had written. ‘That’s the key to it all.’

There was always something, Kristen thought, as she headed for home. Before she went to the library, she would have to find the Three Musketeers book.

It was not easy. Bent almost double, she searched under the boardwalk for an hour. Up above, she could hear thunder, and occasionally, she could see streaks of heat lightning in the distance.

But at last, she spotted the book. It was propped up against one of the posts, a little wrinkled, a little sandy, but she blew on the pages and went off to the library to ask the world’s crabbiest librarian to find The Promise for her.

Mrs. Hailey looked up as Kristen laid the book on the desk in front of her. 'Ah, Kristen. 'She said smiling. 'I have been looking for you. I know I was crabby the other day...'

Kristen began to shake her head, began to say no, but then just smiled and rolled her eyes.

They both laughed.

'I was hot and tired, and I didn't need one more story about a lost book,' Mrs. Hailey said.

'That's all right,' Kristen agreed. 'I found the book anyway.'

'Another reason I'm glad you're here,' Mrs. Hailey said. 'I searched and searched. I even called the library in Jamaica. Your father knows books, but this time he is wrong. There's no children's book called The Promise.'

'I'll tell him,' Kristen said. She thought for a moment.

'How about A Tale of Two Cities?'

'Lovely book. A little hard, but worth it.' Mrs. Hailey plucked it off the shelf in the back of her and stamped it with the end of her pencil.

Outside the window was a sudden flash of lightning, and then a clap of thunder, so close they could feel the vibration.

Mrs. Hailey shivered. 'I am glad it is closing time. And you should be home too.'

Kristen waved her hand. 'No rush. Gram is sewing with her club. She left supper for me in the refrigerator.'

Mrs. Hailey glanced out the window again. 'We're going to have a storm.'

Kristen nodded. 'I'm on my way anyway.' She tucked the book under her arm and was out the door and down the street, feeling the wind pushing her along.

By the time she crossed to the other side of Cross Bay, it had begun to rain. The wind picked up papers and swirled them into doorways, and huge drops spattered the dust along the boulevard.

Kristen began to run, thinking about Tom. She had told a hundred lies, a thousand lies, but Noah had told only one. And it was not a lie. All he had done was keep his eyes closed.

She sighed.

He had sat in the boat the other afternoon and closed his eyes to show her. 'I was afraid of the Nazis in France,' he said.

'Very afraid.'

Kristen had backstroked the oars gently, keeping the boat away from the porches, as he told her the rest.

'The lady with the gray dress came with the people from the hospital,' he said, 'and I closed my eyes. It was not that they were mean. Christy was sleeping, and one of them said, 'Poor little girl.' They took her in an ambulance. I knew if I opened my eyes, they would take me with them. I could have stayed.'

'It's all right.' Kristen could see his hands clasped tight together, and his knees clenched. He was shaking as if he were cold on that hot afternoon. 'I would have been afraid too,' she said. 'I would have shut my eyes.'

'I wanted to come to America,' he told her. 'I wanted to be safe. I did not even say goodbye.'

'Oh, Tom,' she had said, knowing how he felt.

'I left Christy... 'he had begun again, so quietly she had to lean forward to hear him, '...and Nagymamma said to stay together, to be a family.'

Kristen had begun to talk. She said everything she could think of everything she thought Gram might have said. 'The war will be over,' she told him, 'And Christy will come, and even Nagymamma. We will all be in Ridgway together.'

'Nagymamma was incredibly old. I think maybe...' He stopped. 'Christy has no family except me. She has no one special to watch out for her.'

Kristen could see him looking toward the sea, the waves high, breakers crashing onto the beach. He shivered.

'The lady leaned over. I felt her putting something into my coat pocket. It is Christy's address. I will show you someday.' He

shook his head. 'What good is it? I cannot write to her. I must go back and get her somehow.'

'You can't go back,' Kristen said. 'You can see the water. It would never work. It is my fault. I should not have...' She bit her lip. 'It was my lie.'

'I want to tell you something, Kristen. 'He said. 'I was so angry, so sad when I left Hungary. I told Nagymamma I would be angry and sad forever.'

Kristen looked up. It was hard to see his face because her tears were blinding her.

'Do you know what Nagymamma said?' he asked, 'she said I would be happy someday. She said I would have a friend, a good friend. It is as if she knew about you.'

'We'll make a pact,' she said.

'What is that?'

'We will not lie. We will be brave.' 'Yes,' he said.

'But not so brave to try for the ship. Promise?'

There was another tremendous streak of lightning. It lit the porch and the whole of the sky, and she could see in the distance a rowboat at the edge of the bay, about to cross through the edge of the marshes. Now, in the pouring rain, Kristen was reminded of her father. She reached the house and pulled open the kitchen door, thinking she was going to write and ask him about the book *The Promise*.

It was from Tom.

'Ah,' she said, stopping to think. 'There are salt-water people and freshwater people.' She held up her hand. 'Then there are some who don't even know enough to fall in love with the water.' She looked at me with satisfaction. 'But they're not us.'

I nodded, thinking of how the river might look as it reflected the last of the fall leaves.

'We'll get out,' Gram said, 'and walk along the jetty.' She was singing under her breath now, a bit of a song I had learned somewhere. 'By the sea, by the sea.' Henry followed us as we went toward the jetty, a path to the sea made of huge boulders tumbled one on top of the other. They were slippery, those rocks, with places your

feet could get caught, and I wondered if I should help Gram climb up. But she did not need help. She swung herself up next to me, her scarf blowing in the wind coming off the sea.

‘Just breathe,’ she said.

She did not have to tell me. I had never smelled anything like that air: fish, and kerosene, or salt.

‘I don't know what I'd do without the ocean,’ she said.

-And-

Then we skittered out to where I could not see anything but water in front of us. Gram pointed down with one foot. Between the rocks were pockets of water, and some of them had tiny fish swimming around in them, fish so small they were blurs of pewter. In one pool was a crab whose claws were no bigger than my pinky nails.

I knelt on the edge of a boulder and put my fingers into the water, watching their reflection as the water moved, feeling the spray on my shirt. Was there snow on the mountain yet?

Do not think about the mountain.

I thought about Green's and the Old Man and Izzy, and I put my hand on my chest because there was such an ache inside.

Gram was a statue standing above me, holding her hat against the wind, her eyes closed, a half-smile on her face.

‘I thought maybe I'd stay for a while,’ I said slowly. ‘As long as you want me to, that is.’

Gram opened her eyes and beamed down at me.

‘So, if you'd like to work on my tree figure...’

She raised her hand to her scarf. ‘I've already started.’

And I knew Green's would be saying, what are you doing, Kristen?

A few minutes later, six or seven people came in. Gram poured the popcorn into wrinkled paper bags for them, her mouth full, and then music blared, and the movie came on.

Afterward, we walked home, watching the mist swirl around the bare Laurel Highlands above us. 'That was a tearjerker,' Gram said.

I nodded, thinking about it: the story of a boy and a dog and Christmas in a small town.

'Henry would feel terrible if we brought a dog into the house,' Gram said, gliding around the icy puddles next to me.

'I know.' I was getting used to Henry. He spent every night on my bed now, and if I did not stretch out my feet he did not attack.

'But we can have Christmas,' Gram said. 'I have ornaments in the attic and an artificial tree. You have never seen the attic. What treasures.' She stopped her face up to bathe in the sleet, so it coated her eyelashes. 'There's one ornament, a Santa Claus, Beatrice and I put it on the tree first every year.' She twirled around, arms up, dipping her graceful hands.

I had that strange feeling again. Everyone was home doing homework for school tomorrow, and I was watching an old lady dance in the street.

I comforted myself with the thought of sitting in Gram's living room after supper every night, sweet chocolate melting on our tongues, wood shavings around our feet.

It is enough, I told Green is in my head, more than enough. I tried not to think of my W picture with the mother, the father, the brother, and the sister.

14

Films of Kristen Deniel

'Over the river and through the Deniel...' Gram sang one morning at breakfast. It was a late breakfast. We stayed up most of the night watching an old black-and-white movie.

'To Grandmother's house?' I asked, dropping a cornflake on the table in front of Henry's nose and jumping back as he raised one paw to warn me.

Gram wagged her hand, her head still bent. She was carving my tree figure from a piece of oak, stripping the bark until the

underneath showed pale and smooth. The head was there, still unformed, the nose just a slight sharp mark.

Gram saw me looking at it. 'A bit at a time,' she said. 'The face last when I'm sure I know you well enough.'

I did not say anything. Instead, I ran one finger over Henry's back. His eyes were closed, he was purring, and I figured he did not know it was me.

'Over the river...', Gram began again, rocking in her chair with a pleased look on her face.

Water, I thought. The ocean. We have been there twice this week. It is Odd to see the ocean near the end of November. I had always thought of it as something to see in the summertime. I put the tea mugs in the sink, sprayed water over them, and waited, leaning against the counter as Gram took a cut in the side of the wood and gently blew the shavings away.

She stood up then, ready to go, but instead, she stopped to peer out the window. 'Someone's coming.'

I glanced out and saw the gray car pulling into her driveway. The hot cocoa woman had come to check up on me.

My fault, I told myself. Hanging around here today instead of going to school. It was that lingering-cold note. I had not been able to resist it.

'It's the wrong time,' I sang to Gram.

She smiled at me, singing too. 'And the wrong place?'

I reached for her wool hat and scarf and the brown hat with the veil. 'Let us go down to the water instead of entertaining,' I told her.

We slipped out the back door, moving as quietly as we could; it was a game. We passed through Gram's three-figure garden, went through the Denieland diagonally across the street.

It was a long walk in the cold, and we had not stopped for jackets, so we were both shivering by the time we felt the difference in the air, smelled the sharp, sweetish smell of the ocean.

We climbed up onto the pier. The fishing boats were gone this late in the morning. I knew some of them by now, and I could see

the two smaller ones somewhere out near the horizon. I kept thinking of that gray car and trying to decide what to do. I bent down and picked up a shell. Its edges were crushed but it had a beautiful color, like the sea itself with the sun shining on it.

‘A piece of good luck,’ Gram said.

I slipped into the pocket of my jeans and nodded. We needed luck.

Gram had moved away from me. I turned and saw her lying on the jetty, holding her hat in one hand, the loose end of her scarf floating in the water. She wiggled herself down and down until I thought she would go over; then, at last, she reached into the mass of foam that had settled around the stanchions of the pier.

A moment later she was up, strands of seagrass clutched in her hand. Several inches long, curled along the edges, they were the color of sand. Gram smiled at me and held them up to my hair. ‘I thought so,’ she said, ‘almost an exact match.’

I nodded, realizing she had gathered them for my wood figure. It made me think of the drawing box the Old Man had given me. How often had I held up a pencil to match the color against something?

Was the drawing box still at the house in Laurel Highlands?

I turned as I heard a car and tires bumping along the wooden planks of the pier in the back of me: the hot cocoa woman.

She came to a stop about two inches away from us and rolled down the window. ‘Why aren’t you in school?’ ‘School?’ Gram asked, looking confused.

I did not answer, of course, I did not. I had learned to keep my mouth closed long ago. In my mind, I pulled myself into a small knot deep inside and tried to think about something else, anything else.

‘Get in the car,’ the hot cocoa woman said, ‘I’ll drive you there right now.’

One of the fishing boats had almost disappeared. All that was left of it was the needle-thin mast on top. Someday I would like to be on that boat, I thought, to see what it would be like to look back at the land. I glanced at the railing that ran along the end of the pier. It was so low it would be hard to see from a ship. ‘School,’ Gram said.

‘Of course.’ She put her hand on my shoulder. It was the hand holding the seagrass. I felt a soft scratch on my skin.

Gram’s legs were bare, with dainty spider veins showing, and her silky shoes were soaked with snow and spray. I did not want the hot cocoa woman to see them.

I opened the back door of the car and slid in, and we drove off, leaving Gram looking after us, her head tilted as she waved at me, the seagrass in her hand blowing in the wind.

‘What’s going on here?’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘No school?’

I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to figure out the best lie I could. ‘I told her today was a holiday, a teachers’ conference.’

The hot cocoa woman shook her head. ‘And she believed that?’ she said. ‘We’ll have to see about this.’

I reached into my pocket and held on to the shell. For the first time in my life, I thought I would have to go to school. I would have to if I wanted to stay at Grams.

Films of Kristen Deniel

My head was around a burl of wood, the seagrass, dried now, a swirl on top. Gram spent hours over it at the kitchen table, humming to herself, a tray of tiny knives spread out in front of her.

It was Monday, early in December, almost dark in the late afternoon. No Chinese dinner tonight. I was making a dish Izzy had taught me. ‘Special deluxe,’ she had said and smiled at me. Chopped meat, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and cheese, spooned over hot rolls. Salad. Pound cake with confectioner’s sugar sifted over the top.

It was going to be a special deluxe evening. Beatrice was leaving the next morning for New Mexico, where she would paint the adobe houses and the desert. ‘I’ll come back when the mood strikes,’ she had said, ‘or when my money runs out. We will close the movie until I get back.’

All week I had had a pain in my chest. I was waiting to see what the hot cocoa woman would do. School was all right. I kept my head in the books, did as on two tests, and had no friends. But if the hot cocoa woman talked to Gram for more than five minutes she would know about Gram. Strange, how much I wanted to stay. It was because Gram needed me. I had never needed it before. Or wanted? asked a

voice in my head. The Old Man had wanted me, I told myself. So had Izzy, so had Green's.

Then why?

Do not think about that. Think about Gram.

'A little forgetful,' Beatrice had said. 'Maybe old age.'

But not always forgetful. There was the afternoon Gram had watched me sketch small films on my pad. 'I remember something.' She tapped one red fingernail on her lower lip. 'There's the paper in the attic. I have not seen it for years. It belonged to my father.'

I climbed the stairs; then, bent like a pretzel, I scurried around the low attic, stepping over bags and bushel baskets, stopping to look at boxes of paper-thin Christmas ornaments and yellowed leather gloves, until I found what she had told me about: huge pieces of paper, gray and dogeared. I ran my hands over them, thinking about the day the Old Man gave me the drawing box.

As I had maneuvered my way back to the steps, Gram had called up. 'There's an easel, too.'

Beatrice came now, hurrying up for the walk. Her hair had been done up in a high pink swirl at the hairdresser. Her nails matched, and so did her huge pink purse.

We were ready for her with the pound cake on Gram's best plate and the dishes on the table. We ate watching the pale December sun drop behind the trees in the backyard. When Gram went inside for something, Beatrice leaned over. 'Take care of her,' she whispered.

I thought of telling her about the hot cocoa woman and the agency, but what if Gram came back?

Beatrice saw me frown. 'Maybe I shouldn't go.'

'Gram said you've wanted to do this all your life.'

'But...'

'Go,' I said, wishing I could go too. I would take the Shortline bus up through Philadelphia State. It would be early summer again, the first time I had seen Green Is and the Old Man, playing checkers in the diner. I would start over. I would do everything differently.

Everything...

But instead, I would do it all right. I would stay with Gram and ...

‘I’ll take care of her,’ I whispered. Somehow, I said in my head.

Beatrice turned over one of my films. ‘I’ll leave my phone number,’ she said. ‘I’ll write it down.’ She patted my hand. ‘I will not be there for the first two or three weeks; I will be traveling around. But just in case.’

‘...The positive.’ He shook his head. ‘Did you ever notice; American songs are strange. I do not know what they mean most of the time.’

‘You’re scaring the fish with that noise.’

‘Not my fish.’ He raised his line. ‘On the ship, last time I was always thirsty, and the water tasted warm. We must bring juice.’ He nodded. ‘Yes. And fruit. Nagymamma always said fruit was important. In the winter we ate tangerines.’

‘And how would you carry all this?’

‘In my pocket.’

‘Very interesting,’ she said, forgetting for a moment if she had to tell him. ‘You have pockets in your bathing suit?’

He waved his hand. ‘I did not think of that.’

‘Tom...’

‘No matter. I will drink warm water, and go without fruit if

I must.’

‘Tom...’

He looked across at her.

She took a breath. ‘We can’t go.’

He turned his head, watching her, and she knew he was seeing the tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say she had changed her mind, that she had heard that the convoys were moving out to sea farther south but lying to Noah was not like lying to anyone else.

He had a way of looking at her as if everything she said was important, serious, or funny, interesting to him somehow. How could she tell him something she had just made up? How could she lie again?

‘I lied,’ she said.

She could see the beginning of a quiver on his line. He was about to catch something... something small, a sea robin. But he did not take his eyes off her, and her mouth was so dry she could hardly speak.

‘What do you mean you lied?’ he asked. ‘You mean you do not want to go with me? You are still worrying I am a coward because of the plane because it took me so long to swim?’

‘You’re not a coward, Tom.’

He frowned. ‘I am not afraid of anything.’

‘I tell lies,’ She said, almost whispering. ‘I tell people that my aunt is a spy. I say my father is in the Secret Service. I tell you I am going to take a ship when I know the ships are too far out, that they seem closer than they are, and the sea is too strong and rough.’

‘But I can go,’ he said. ‘I am not afraid.’

She felt tears running down her cheeks and reached up to wipe them away.

‘You are crying because of your father?’ he asked.

She nodded. ‘And because of you. You thought I would help you go back...’ She took a breath. ‘I said it because I didn’t say goodbye to my father,’ she said. ‘I sneaked out of the house, and I never went back to say goodbye, and now...’

Noah reached out. He held his hand over her wrist the way Poppy had. ‘Kristen. He said. ‘I lie too.’

She shook her head. ‘Not the way I do, every minute.’

‘Yes, because I am afraid.’ For the first time, he saw that line was wiggling, that he surely had a fish. ‘I will pull this fish up and set it free,’ he said. ‘Then I will tell you, Christy. And you will

know why I must go on this ship back to Christy.’

Kristen had read *The Story of Roland* with Poppy last winter, but not the other. She and Noah could take a quick trip to the library after they went swimming. Why not?

Gram had finished Lynnnatta's note and was looking out the window now. Her gray eyes were sad.

'Here,' Kristen said, feeling generous. 'Read my letter from Poppy. It will make you laugh.'

Kristen took the last bite of tuna, thinking about a night last summer when they had eaten the same thing. It was almost dark after Poppy had come. They had been talking, laughing. It was something about Gram's fishing being so bad they had to eat canned tuna. And outside, the fireflies had floated over the porch.

'Do you remember...' Gram began as she put the letter down.

'Last summer?' Kristen asked.

'No, the year of the hurricane,' Gram said.

Kristen thought about it, the bay water, usually flat, crashing up against the pilings. Boats, let loose, filled with water, breaking apart and sinking. Their rowboat, upside down, looking like a walnut shell, under a couple of feet of water.

'What made you think of that?' She asked.

'I have a memory of your father, coming down the road, his shoes off...' Gram bit at her lip. 'His suit pants were rolled up to his knees, full of mud, his newspaper-'

'-soaking wet, covering his head,' Kristen said.

-And-

'We laughed,' Gram said.

Kristen nodded. She remembered how funny her father had looked, hopping along. She and Gram had watched from the kitchen door, so-so happy he was home.

And now Gram was crying. Kristen could not believe it. She had never seen Gram cry. Kristen's mouth was suddenly dry.

'Why?'

Gram shook her head, her mouth trembling, trying to smile. 'I miss your father.'

Kristen stood up, about to go to her, to put her arms around her.

'By the time he comes home,' Gram said, 'you'll be playing the piano for him.'

15

It was Friday afternoon, lunchtime. The church bells were chiming twelve, Kate Smith was singing 'God Bless America' on the radio, and Kristen and Gram were having hot tuna fish in tomato sauce. It was horrible, but Gram had not caught a fish all week, and Kristen had not even tried.

'I agree,' Gram said. 'I can tell by your face you don't like it either.'

'I hate this stuff,' Kristen said, eating as fast as she could. As soon as lunch was over, she and Noah were going to practice again. They had been in the water so much that Mrs. Meyer said they were going to turn into fish. She said it smiling. Even Mrs. Meyer could see that Noah was never going to be a fish.

Noah had talked about its last night, said the same thing over and over. 'We will row the boat out, stay in it until the ship passes right near us. I will only have to swim the last, smallest bit, and I will be wearing a life jacket...'

Kristen stared out the window. The water was rough, rough. Even though the sun was shining, the water had a dark look at it, and she could see whitecaps at the end of the canal. They could not swim this afternoon. Alleluia. What instead? The movies?

Fishing. Yes, fishing. They had not done that once this summer.

Gram was saying something, had been talking for minutes.

Something about forgetting. Kristen looked up.

'You asked me for money,' Gram said.

Kristen took another mouthful, trying not to taste the fish.

'I don't need it anymore.'

‘I’m sorry,’ Gram was saying. ‘I asked you how much you wanted, but you were getting dressed, and...’ She raised one shoulder. ‘I never thought about it again until just this minute.’

Kristen looked up, trying to remember. How much? Gram had said. How much had she lost? How much did she need?

Kristen felt a quick flash of guilt.

Gram looked hot and tired. It was boiling in the little kitchen. Even with the shades halfway down, the sun lay in patches on the table, the counters, and the floor. Suppose something happened to Gram someday?

‘Never mind,’ Gram said. ‘I am going to make up for it...

and for the tuna too. I have a letter, two letters for you. One from Poppy, and one from Lynnnatta.’ She sighed. ‘Poor Lynnnatta.’ Kristen put her fork down. That is what she got for spending the morning swimming. She had missed the mail carrier. Now Gram would be reading over her shoulder.

Gram slid the letters over to her. Lynnnatta’s filthy ways, Poppy’s, airmail, tissue-paper thin. ‘The mail carrier was looking for you,’ Gram said.

Kristen did not answer. She opened Lynnnatta’s first, a long letter in pencil, hard to read in Lynnnatta’s scrawl.

Thank your grandmother for the letter.

Kristen looked up quickly. Gram was not leaning over her shoulder. She was turning the pages of her newspaper, *The Wave*. Kristen looked down again, finding her place.

Thank her for the picture of Eddie swimming and those funny stories about when he was little. She made me laugh. I felt so bad. She misses your father. She calls him Jerry, he is not that strange, I always think about him as Mr. Mollahan. We still do not know anything about Eddie.

Love Lynnnatta.

How is the house?

‘You wrote to Lynnnatta? You sent a picture?’ Kristen asked. ‘You didn’t tell me that.’

Gram pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. 'I knew how she felt. Suppose it was Poppy?'

Kristen sat looking at Gram from the corner of her eye. She had never thought about Gram missing Poppy, not once in all these weeks. She pushed Lynnnatta's letter across the table to her, then took a breath. She had forgotten the house part. But Gram did not seem to notice anything strange about Lynnnatta's mentioning her house.

Kristen reached for Poppy's letter, the best for last. It was a funny letter, Poppy reminding her of the time they painted the window and the screen had fallen over the edge of the porch and floated away. Your fault, Poppy had written for fun. They both knew it had been his fault. And then, in the end, there was more about books. Do not forget to read *The Story of Roland* again, and *The Promise*. Go to the library for them. See Mrs. Hailey. She knows every book in the world!

Kristen veered off to the sink. She slid in her dish with a couple of other dishes and ran water over them. She could see Gram standing to put a bottle of milk into the refrigerator. No one would ever know tears had been in her eyes a moment ago.

16

Kristen wiped her hands with a towel. 'We are going to swim,

Noah and me. And then go to the library.'

Gram nodded, and Kristen was out the door, around the side porch, and down into the rowboat. Noah was sitting there, waiting for her, looking even skinnier than usual with the huge orange life jacket around him.

She hopped into the boat and began to row past the houses, angling toward the marshes, leaning forward to keep the sun out of her eyes. Just before they sealed the package, Kristen reached for the key on the table and dropped it inside. 'I think we shouldn't come back anymore,' she told him.

'All right,' he said, thinking about it. 'I will take Pap home with me.'

Then they were finished, the package neatly addressed, delivered to the post office, on its way to Lynnnatta at last. 'Now we swim,' said Tom. 'In the ocean.' They walked back to the Smiths with

the cat, and by the time Mrs. Meyer had made them a picnic snack, Pap was sound asleep on the couch pillow. 'In the bay,' Kristen answered.

It was hot and humid, and by the time they crossed the tar road and walked through the sand and rushes toward Jamaica Bay, Kristen felt sticky and irritable. She raced into the water, arms stretched, diving deep, feeling the cold bay closing over her, and then she was up again, feeling washed and cool, the sun warmed her face. She brushed her hair back away from her eyes.

Tom, she had forgotten him. He was standing on the edge, his feet dug into the sand, waiting. Kristen swam back toward him, as close as she could without scraping the bottom. 'You have to float first,' she said. 'Don't even try to swim yet.' She had said that a dozen times the other day. He took a step into the water. 'I have no time to fool around with floating.' He had said that a dozen times too. He sounded the way she did over practicing the piano. I have no time to fool around.

'Thick as a piece of wood,' Sister Jillien would have said about him. It was what she always said when she was teaching math problems, and someone could not understand.

But there was something else. He was afraid of the water; she was sure of it. She told him to loosen up, to lie back and drift with the water. She told him to unclench his fists and pretend he was one of the reeds, floating.

She told him all the things Gram had told her when she was learning. But it did not do any good. He could not float.

He could not swim either. They tried that next. Noah was like a cat who did not want to get wet, or a bird weighed down with feathers.

'You are a terrible teacher,' he said, trying to joke.

She bit down on her lip, feeling sorry for him. 'It takes time. That is what Gram always says.' She shook her head. 'I can't believe I'm sounding like Gram.'

'You are lucky...' he began and stopped.

She held up her hand. 'You do not have to tell me,' She said. 'I know it. I have been thinking about you and Nagymamma, but you do not know what a pain Gram is.'

He smiled a little. 'Nagymamma was a pain sometimes too. We had to say Kerem and köszönöm, and szívesen every two minutes... 'Please,' and 'Thank you,' and 'You're welcome...'

'She didn't teach you very well,' Kristen said, smiling too. 'Here I'm wasting time showing you how to swim, and you haven't said kos whatever once.'

'For teaching me how to drown myself?' Then his face was suddenly serious. 'It is August, Kristen.'

She took a breath. 'Maybe we should forget about Europe,' she said. 'Maybe the war will be over in a year.'

'A year,' he said, sounding as if it were forever.

She tried to think of what else to say, but he was watching her, and she could not even look into his eyes. 'All right,' she said.

'I guess we could try again after lunch.'

'I hope I can do this.' Noah sounded worried.

Kristen rowed across the bay, moving swiftly, pulling hard on the oars. She would not have to tell him. He would tell her to go without him, and then she would say...

She looked across at him. His face was white, his lips pale.

She threw the anchor into the water. 'Now we will go over the side. The boat is not going anywhere, and if you get in trouble you can reach for one of the tall reeds.'

Tom's eyes were almost closed.

'I'll go first,' she said and went over the side slowly, Carefully, so the boat would not rock. She hung on to the edge with both hands for a second, getting used to the feel of the water, cooling her body, then slipped away from the boat. 'Do not forget, Tom. Keep your mouth closed. Last time...'

'I know.' He was clumsy getting over the side, rocking the boat enough to create small waves. And then he was in the water, reaching up to grip the side.

'Let go,' she said. 'You have on a life preserver. You cannot sink.' She grinned. 'Even you can't sink.'

He shut his eyes and let go.

‘Good,’ she said, treading water. ‘Feel how lovely. Not too cold. Open your eyes, will you?’

He struck out with one arm and then the other.

‘Kick your feet, remember?’

He opened his eyes. ‘Too much to remember all at once.’
He was out of breath.

‘Take your time.’

He started again, head high.

‘Not bad, not bad at all, but wait a minute.’ She swam over to him, thinking he looked like a turtle. Land turtles. ‘What do you think will happen if you just put your head in the water?’

‘Remember last time?’

‘Yes, but your mouth was wide open. Duck your head. Just feel...’

He took a deep breath and leaned forward. A moment later he was up again. ‘I can hardly stay down.’ He sounded surprised, pleased.

‘See,’ she said. ‘Nothing’s going to happen.’

He nodded once, and then a second time. ‘You are right, Kristen.’

He leaned into the water again, raising his arm. She could see his feet behind him, kicking a little, kicking harder. He was moving. He was swimming.

She watched as he circled the boat, then floated, his hands pale in the water, fingers spread. ‘I am swimming,’ he told her.

‘I know,’ she answered him, thinking she had done it. She had taught him to swim. And then something else. She would have to tell him they could not go to Europe.

The sea was high today. Kristen tried to remember when she had last seen it this way, yellow-green water reflecting the strange color in the sky. They had rowed only a short way from the porch, still in the bay, to fish.

She dropped her fishing line over the side of the rowboat. The day was hot, the wormy bait sticky on her fingers. She felt sick with the smell of it, sick thinking about what Noah would say when she told him.

It had been a terrible day from start to finish. The library had been closed for days, and when they had finally got there this morning, Mrs. Hailey had not been very friendly. 'Bringing sand in on your feet,' she had grumbled. 'Leaving a trail behind you like Hansel and Gretel.'

And then when Kristen had tried to get both books, *The Story of Roland* and *The Promise*, Mrs. Hailey had looked up over her glasses. 'Don't you have a book at home, overdue?'

Kristen had remembered she had left *The Three Musketeers* at the beach, and when she began to make something up, Mrs. Hailey had sighed. 'Don't, Kristen,' she had said.

It had ended up that all she got was *The Story of Roland*, which she had already read, and what good was that? And she had thought Mrs. Hailey was her friend.

Noah was going on about meeting a ship. 'It will go to France. I think it will. I know it will. I will start in Paris. I will go to every hospital. I will go everywhere. I have the money. I will buy what

I need. I will find her, do not worry.'

Werry.

Kristen took a breath. 'Who's going to take care of Pap?'

Noah looked over the side of the boat, as if he could see the bottom, as if he were searching for a flounder. 'The Smiths, of course. They will do that for me. Don't you think so?'

'I have to tell you...' Kristen began.

But Noah was singing now. He paused. 'I will teach her this song from your radio,' and he began again. "'You must accent-tchu-eat...'

'Tom.'

Kristen had dreamed about Lynnnatta, and Eddie too, but when she awoke, she could not remember much more than that. She

knew she had been crying in the dream. She was still crying when she opened her eyes.

Gram was standing next to her bed. 'It was only a dream, Kristen,' she said.

Kristen leaned up on one arm. Poppy had been in the dream, and Christy, but Kristen had not seen her face, just her hair, dark and shiny like Tom's, and there was something about Madeline, the book Madeline.

Gram sat down on the edge of the bed. 'What is it?

What is the matter?'

She stuck out her lower lip. 'If you want to learn, it will be faster in the bay. And that is my final offer.'

'I do not know what that means,' he said.

'You don't have to.' She unwrapped his hand from her arm and scrambled to her feet. 'I am going to put Eddie's picture back in the living room now, and then I am going to the bay to swim. If you want to come with me, fine. If not, too bad.'

She marched into the living room and dusted the end table with her arm. She thought of Eddie on a beach in Normandy. She had seen newspaper films: Nazi pillboxes set into the rocks, firing; soldiers in the sand, some of them dead, everything confused. They had to get off the beaches before they could begin to free the French cities.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table and ran her fingers over his face. 'Be just a little lost,' she whispered. He was smiling in the picture, and she could remember him smiling the same way when she had met him coming out of the movie, or at Mrs. Sherman's, or on the way to church. She wondered if he could count on her as a friend even though he was much older. 'What do you think, Eddie?' she asked.

'Christy talks to herself all the time,' Noah said.

Kristen marched past him and out the door. 'Are you coming?'

Noah looked up at the ceiling, blinking, trying to decide.

At the same moment, Pap darted between their legs and out the door.

Noah reached for her, and so did Kristen.

She was halfway down the path before they caught up. 'She's growing,' Kristen said, scooping the cat into her arms and bringing her into the house.

Noah nodded. 'I could bring her back to Canada, I think.'

'Good,' Kristen said.

'But I am not going back to Canada,' Noah said.

'Remember? I am going to Europe.'

'And- I'm going to the bay,' Kristen said.

'I guess I will come too,' he said.

Kristen did not answer. She marched out the door, taking a deep breath.

'Things are never going to be the same,' she said. 'Not even when the war is over. Noah might not have his grandmother.

He might not have Christy.'

'Everything is so confused over there. A flood of people has come from the rest of Europe, soldiers...' Gram sighed. 'If our army can get across France, if they can liberate Paris, then maybe someone can get to Christy.' She shook her head. 'But you are right, Kristen. things will not be the same. We will all be changed, all of us who lived through this.'

'But Poppy said it would be the same.'

'I know.' Gram patted her shoulder. 'He wanted it to be the same for you.'

Kristen took a breath. She thought of Lynnnatta not remembering Eddie's face. Kristen could see his face so clearly, even without the picture.

And- Eddie's picture was standing there on the Dillons' living room table. It would take her only five minutes to wrap it and bring it down to the post office this morning. If only...

Suppose she told Gram? Gram was sitting there next to her, twisting her long hair with both hands, redoing her bun, looking worried. She could tell Gram she would never go into the

Dillons' houses again if she could just get the picture to Lynnnatta.

Gram was standing up now, picking yesterday's clothes up off the floor. 'Just a mess in here.'

Kristen blew a breath through her mouth. 'I need some money.'

Gram blinked. 'How did you get from Christy to needing money?'

'I lost my tan purse,' Kristen said slowly.

'Oh, Kristen.' Gram shook her head. 'If only you'd think sometimes...'

Kristen slung her legs out from under her quilt. 'Never mind.'

'How much?'

Kristen twitched one shoulder. 'I don't remember.'

She went into the bathroom and yanked on her bathing suit. It was still damp yesterday. Gram was saying something, but Kristen turned on the water, blasting it into the sink, and began to brush her teeth.

When she came out, her breakfast was on the table, juice, and Rice Krispies with bananas and strawberries sliced on top, a face with a smiling mouth. And Noah was sitting there, talking to Gram.

Kristen ran her fingers through her hair to comb it, then sat across from him. She reached for her juice and took a gulp.

They were talking about music again. Noah was telling Gram that his violin was still in Hungary. 'In a blue case,' he said, 'maybe in my bedroom where I put it.' He grinned at Kristen. 'If I had it here, we could play duets.'

Gram was laughing, and Kristen frowned, but then she laughed too. She could just see skinny Noah playing the violin, playing some wonderful Hungarian thing, and she would be doing the C scale from one end of the piano to the other.

Gram patted her head. 'I love to hear you laugh, Kristen.'

And- Noah nodded. 'She is like my sister, Christy.'

Gram was on her way out. 'Going to catch a fish,' she said. 'I'm not going to do another thing all day but spend time in that rowboat and feel that ocean underneath me.'

Then she was gone. Kristen watched her through the screen, going down to the rowboat, her fishing rod in one hand. And then she noticed Noah was wearing his bathing suit and one of Mr. Meyer's old shirts. She knew he was hoping she would teach him to swim this morning.

Kristen stood up, finishing her cereal in a couple of Spoonfuls. 'I still need the money for Lynnnatta,' she said. 'I thought of telling Gram...'

Noah nodded. 'I was thinking about that too,' he said. 'I have the money.'

'No.' She shook her head. 'Fifty dollars is so much... too much.'

'From my aunt,' Noah said. 'I asked her for money.'

'Mrs. Meyer? You told Mrs. Meyer?'

'No. I just asked, 'Could I have...' and before I could finish, she said I should have some money to spend for myself. She said she never thought of it.' Noah was pulling money out. A dollar in one pocket. Fifty cents in another.

Kristen started in on 'The Blue Danube' again with one finger of her right hand and added some dum dum's with the left hand.

Footsteps were coming around the side of the house. She stood up, still playing, as the top of Tom's head passed the window, then backed up, and his face came into view.

'I thought we were going to...' He held up the rolled-up towel.

'Kristen, are you playing?' Gram called.

'Hold your horses,' Kristen told Tom. 'I can't get out of here for another twenty-two minutes.'

'Kristen.' Gram called again.

Kristen stretched up on the bench to get a good look at Tom. 'Besides,' she told him, 'I have a surprise for you. Listen to what I am playing. It is for you, special.'

She plunked herself down on the bench again and began to play 'The Blue Danube' as nicely as she could.

After a minute, she heard a noise. Was Noah laughing again? She ended 'The Blue Danube' with a crash and began the C scale again.

She could hear Gram at the back door telling Noah to come in for some iced tea while he waited. Good grief. She opened the John Thompson book to the piece she knew best, the piece she had played a million times last winter. She could hear Gram and Noah talking in the kitchen. The clock was not moving.

She began to play. She hit the wrong note with her left pinky. It sounded horrible. For a minute there was silence in the kitchen.

Kristen went back to the C scale, played it one last time, but softly now as if she knew what she was doing. Then she slid off the seat and went into the kitchen. Noah and Gram were talking about music, but not about the piano, about violin music. Noah was telling Gram about the lessons he had taken, and Gram, her head to one side, was listening, nodding.

'Come on, Tom,' Kristen said, feeling ready to scream, 'We have stuff to do, remember? We cannot hang around here all day.'

'I'm so glad.' She wanted to hug him. She reached for his hand, warm and dry, and he squeezed back.

They spent the next half hour taking care of the picture. They cut up a paper bag and found cardboard and a ball of string in Mrs. Dillon's closet.

Pap loved it, the noise, and the crinkling of paper as they wrapped the picture in layers of cardboard, and the ball of string to bat across the kitchen floor. But Lynnnatta's house was spoiled for Kristen. She wondered what would happen if Mrs. Dillon found out Kristen had been in her house all summer. And she would find out. She would see the picture and ask Lynnnatta.

They were at Lynnnatta's house, sitting on the kitchen floor, with Tom's coat in front of them. The coat was navy blue wool, scratchy against Kristen's fingers. She poked Gram's manicure scissors into the collar seam, trying to slide the points under the tiny stitches. Noah was leaning over her shoulder, and Pap was playing with her sneaker lace.

Kristen could feel the perspiration running down her back, the metal scissors sliding in her slippery fingers, when Noah began to talk, grinning. 'Hungarians play 'The Blue Danube' too,' he said.

'It never sounded like that.'

'Like what?'

He looked down at the coat. 'Like terrible. Like Christy plays.' He smiled. 'Christy likes to play duets. Loud.'

Swallowed. 'I do not want to play the piano anyway. It takes too much time, and...' She would like Christy. 'You should try it,' Kristen said. 'Hanging around on the bench, trying to...'

'In my grandmother's restaurant,' Noah said slowly, 'I played the violin on Sunday. I played that song, and 'Vienna Life,' which is my grandmother's favorite.' He stopped. 'I loved the violin, Kristen. If only I could have taken it with me...'

He took a breath. 'In Kalocsa's, Nagymamma's restaurant, people ate goulash. They had rolls with sweet butter. For dessert, they ate rigojancsi, and gesztenyepüre, or placentas.'

'What...'

'Palacsintas are pancakes. They are filled with jam or chocolate.'

Kristen looked up.

'Nagymamma gave me plain ones, cold ones, folded over.'

She put them in my coat pocket when I left.'

Kristen knew he was ready to cry, but she could not think of what to say. She just kept snipping at the collar until there was a wide opening in the seam. Without looking, she pushed the coat toward him and watched as he edged his thumb and index finger gently into the seam. He worked the bills out, laying each one on the floor next to

them. 'These are Magyar money,' he said. 'We call them forints. And this one is an English pound.'

He did not have to tell her about the next, a fifty-dollar bill, worn and creased. 'Nagymamma did not know where we were going. She had to guess about the money.'

Looked at him, thinking about going to another country without Poppy or Gram, without even knowing where she was going. 'Where is...' she began. Noah reached down for the cat. He held her up to his face, rubbing her soft fur on his cheek. 'Nagymamma might be in her house. She might be in prison. I do not know.'

Kristen thought of her mother, who had died, but had died of something wrong with her heart, and not in prison, but at home in St. Paul's. Kristen touched the money on the floor beside her, patted it the way she patted her stars. It was as if she could almost see Tom's grandmother, who had touched it last.

The cat put its tiny needle claws into Tom's shoulder as he reached over to put his fingers into the coat seam again. And now there was a tiny picture with three faces. Tom, of course, with that mop of hair, and an old woman, with a lined face and little round glasses, and a girl. The girl had curls like Tom's, but they were softer, smoother, and she was laughing.

'Christy,' Kristen said.

'Yes.' Noah looked down at the picture again; then put it carefully in his pocket. He folded most of the money and put that in his pocket too. Then he handed her fifty dollars. 'Here, for

Eddie's picture.'

She looked down at the money. 'We can't'

'My grandmother would not mind. She would be glad, I think.'

Shook her head. 'Don't you see? We could never go to the post office with all this money. They would ask where we had gotten it. They would tell my grandmother.'

Noah raised one shoulder. 'It is too much money, then?'

'More than I've ever seen at once,' Kristen said.

Noah scooped up the money and stuffed it back into the coat. He sat back on his heels and put the cat down on the floor. 'I guess we should not use Hungarian money. That is not so much.'

Kristen grinned. 'I do not think so. Nobody around here has ever seen Hungarian money.'

'No.' He grinned back.

But then Kristen heard the church bells. Four times. Four o'clock. The post office was closed, and poor Lynnnatta would have to go another day without the picture.

Kristen sighed. 'I will teach you to swim, Tom. We will go over to the bay now, and I will figure out how to get money before tomorrow.'

'Not the bay,' he said, 'the ocean.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'I do not know what that means, 'ridiculous.'

She narrowed her eyes. He knew very well what it meant.

'You can't learn to swim in that rough water.'

He reached forward to grab her arm. 'Do you know that Christ is waiting for me? Do you know that summer will be over, and I will have to go back to Canada...?'

She nodded. 'I'll have to go back to St. Paul's, and Sister Sara in the sixth grade.'

'Please.' He was holding her arm so hard now she could feel each one of his fingers tightening around it. His eyes were so blue, and she knew it was never going to happen the way he wanted, and it was all her fault... all because of her wild stories.

'Oh yes, Kristen. I will learn to swim, and you will row.'

18

Next, to her, Gram took her silver rosary beads out of their case, and on her other side, Mrs. Colgan opened her missal.

In a moment Father Murphy was out at the altar beginning the Mass, and Kristen began to pray for Eddie, and then for Poppy.

She prayed for Tom's sister too, and his grandmother.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table next to the couch and went onto the porch to find her Sunday clothes, even though it was not Sunday.

Just ten minutes later, she was walking into church, stopping for a quick dip of holy water, and sliding into a pew next to Gram.

As she knelt there and waited for Father Murphy to begin, the sun blasted in around the partly opened stained-glass windows. It felt as if it must be a hundred degrees. The fan in front did not do any good. It just moved the fringe a little on the banner that hung over their heads.

It was a dessert in that church. She lifted the brim of her straw hat away from her head and fanned the air with her hymnbook, watching Mrs. Meyer come up the aisle with Noah until Gram gave her a poke.

Kristen tried to imagine what it must feel like to be Eddie, to have been taken prisoner by the Germans or just somewhere by himself, hurt.

Father Murphy had hung the banner there himself. On its white background were rows of blue stars, one for each of the men from the parish who were in the service. There was one gold star in the middle. That was for a sailor who used to live near the Cross-Bay Theatre. He had been killed at Pearl Harbor. And now, in a day or two, there would be a silver star for Eddie Dillon, who was missing, lost somewhere on a beach in France, and no one knew if they would ever find him.

Gram put her hand up to her mouth. 'A phone call from Willow Run to Mrs. Tannenbaum's candy store. We are on our way to church... a special Mass and we are going to pray as hard...' She took a breath. 'We're all praying, I guess, the entire world, that this will be over soon.' She blinked back tears. 'And right now, we're going to pray for Eddie, and your father, and Tom's family, and everyone who-' She broke off.

I watched her make careful, even numbers on the paper and turn it over as Gram came back into the kitchen, another one of my films in her hand.

I did not take any chances, though. Throughout the rest of the dinner, I said the phone number over in my head. I wanted to be sure I would remember it.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never showed this picture to anyone: the golden field, me with my head back laughing, my hands at the wheel of the truck. It took four or five pencils to do this: I started with Summer Green, Iron Gray, and Beach Sand. That was something, that Saturday night.

Izzy and the Old Man were going to the movie in town.

‘It’s a romance,’ the Old Man said, waggling his eyebrows at me.

‘A waste of a good evening.’

‘You’ll love it, John,’ Izzy said. ‘There are snacks in the refrigerator and the cabinet. Snacks all over the place. You will not starve.’ She leaned out the door. ‘And there’s a tin of that hard candy on my dresser.’

Green crossed his eyes. ‘They’re so sour they curl your tongue.’

‘Not mine.’ I had been eating them all summer; I could not get enough of them.

‘That’s because-’ he began. I knew he was going to joke about my being sour.

But the Old Man came out the door. ‘I just saw the mess you left in the shed,’ he told Green’s. ‘Straighten that place up.’

It is bad enough your room looks the way it does.’

‘What’s this neatness kick?’

‘Did you notice how neat Holly’s things are?’

Without thinking, I put my hand up. ‘Don’t...’ I began, but it came out like a breath. Neither one of them heard, or they just were not paying attention.

Green unfolded himself from his chair so slowly, it seemed as if he were not moving.

‘Hang in there, Kristen Copses,’ Green is said as the Old Man stamped around the side of the house and started the car.

‘We’re going to be out of here in five minutes.’

‘Where?’ Already he was running around the side of the house to the shed.

I sat there listening as he threw things around for a few minutes, and then he was back. ‘I am going to teach you to drive. Good thing they took the car instead of the truck.’ He dangled the keys in front of my nose. ‘Anyone who can keep her things disinfected can drive a truck.’

‘I don’t think-’ I began.

‘Scared?’

‘Never.’

‘All right, don’t waste my valuable time arguing.’

In the back of the evergreens and the row of holly bushes was a flat field. The Old Man kept it mowed against snakes, rattlers that struck blind in the summer. ‘Don’t worry,’ Green’s said, sliding into the truck. ‘No one’s been bitten for about a hundred years. Pop worries about everything.’

Green drove as if he had been doing it all his life. He grinned across at me in the suicide seat. ‘Since I was about eight,’ he said, knowing what I was thinking. ‘I’m going to take the truck up the mountain one day.’

He showed me the gears and the pedals, and then we switched seats. And so, I drove in that field in the summer evening light, green’s shouting directions as I lurched through the ruts, bucking, stalling, starting up again with gear-grinding noises.

‘Aha, Kristen Copses,’ he yelled. ‘There’s hope for you. I knew it!’

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal a little harder.

‘Yahoo!’ I yelled. ‘It’s me, driving a pickup truck!’

19

Films of Kristen Deniel

One raw Tuesday morning I awoke and pulled the shade aside; the trees were charcoal smudges against an iron-gray sky. Gram would not be up for another hour or two. I had not done my homework the night before, had not even thought of it. I had fallen asleep watching television with Henry next to me on the couch and Gram working at the kitchen table.

I still faced rows of math problems. Three pages, four. And there was a social studies composition on Henry Hudson.

I tried to decide whether I could work on it now. It was early. I popped the bread into the toaster and opened a can of Salmon Delight for Henry, who sniffed at it and walked away.

'I can never figure you out,' I said and buttered a square of toast for him instead. Then I pulled my books off the shelf and sat at the table with one of Gram's knitted shawls around me.

In front of me, I had the radio on. Two weeks until Christmas. It had snowed upstate, six inches.

Ah, snow for Green's. Were they up yet, the three of them?

Were they having breakfast in their winter house in Hancock? What would it be like if I were there, doing my homework, eating at Izzy's apple pancakes?

The radio announcer said it was a foggy day on Long Island three minutes before eight o'clock.

I finished the first page of math problems; I could never do the rest in a half hour. Never mind Henry Hudson sailing up the river.

I could take one more day off. Just one. I grabbed my jacket and pad and went out the back door, holding it open for Henry to come too. The canal would be wonderful this morning, with a mist rising off the water. And all the while I jogged toward the jetty, I knew it was a mistake. But still, I kept going.

When I got to the pier, I sat, hands clenched in my pocket against the cold, my legs dangling, watching the fisher on the DanBar-J gear up to go out for blues. He knew me now and waved. Last week he had even dropped a flounder on the bench for me. I had pan-fried it with a little butter, and Gram had put two dusty pink candles on the table, like a party.

Henry had loved his share. He had not scratched at me once when I put his plate down in front of him on the radio. 'Ah,' I had said, pleased with him. 'You'd do anything for a handout.'

Now I watched the fingers of fog drift over the water while Henry sat nearby, washing one mangy leg. It was the kind of day I loved. I could not see the end of the pier, and no one could see me from there. I could hear the fisher from the DanBar-J, though.

'Want a job?' He called.

He was not thinking about school either.

A job? Why not? There would be money for cat food, and a couple of cans of ravioli. I had not had ravioli since the stucco house.

I nodded and found myself hosing down to the deck of the Dan-Bar-J. As I scrubbed the dried-on pieces of fish with a wire brush, I spent the money in my mind.

He handed me three crumpled-up bills. I smoothed them out, and then as I gave him a half wave, he reached into his pocket and gave me another dollar.

I could not wait to get back to Gram. She would pat her scarf around her neck and fuss with her hat. We would sail up and down the aisles of DeMattia's Food Store, choosing ravioli, and a pink can of shredded tuna for Henry. Some marmalade, too, to have with the English muffins we had left.

I had forgotten all about homework, and school, and even the hot cocoa woman. Henry and I headed home as the fog lifted and the sun appeared behind the trees. It was going to be a beautiful day, a day for a picnic on the rock jetty.

I pulled open the back door and stopped. Above the newscaster's voice on the radio-'Nine-thirty and still snowing in upstate Philadelphia'-was the sound of voices in the living room.

Henry heard them too. He scampered back outside to sit on the bench, an irritable look on his skinny face.

I thought about scampering with him. I knew who it must be. But how could I leave Gram alone with her? Instead, I shrugged out of my jacket, put my pad on the table, and lifted my chin as I went toward the front of the house.

The hot cocoa woman sat on the lilac couch, and Gram sat in the chair opposite. They both had cups of coffee in their hands.

Good move, Gram, I thought. Her coffee was great, dark, and rich, as the advertisements went.

I nodded at the hot cocoa woman and sank in the third chair, facing the window, looking out as if something wonderful were going on right there in the front yard.

They talked about old movies and the wonderful colors in the living room; they talked about coffee waking them up, and all the time my heart was pounding. Without looking at the hot cocoa woman's face, I knew she was straining at the conversation, that this was not what she wanted to say.

She was wearing sweats... Did she ever wear anything else? I could see around the creamy spot on her chest. She had spilled her coffee. What was the matter with that woman, anyway?

But Gram looked fine, Gram looked wonderful, with that slash of red across her mouth, a silky green dress that looked like the sea. I knew she was groping, though. She had no idea who the woman sitting across from her was.

At last, the hot cocoa woman put down her cup. 'Kristen,' she said, 'I know I'm keeping you from school.'

I waved my hand. No problem, lady.

She looked at Gram then. 'I think, Mrs. Cahill, that we need to talk about another place for Kristen.'

Gram sat up straight. I could see her thin hands on the coffee cup trembling a little, her mouth, too. 'Kristen is leaving?'

They both looked at me.

'I've found a family for her,' the hot cocoa woman said. 'A mother and father with a three-year-old boy and a dog.' She kept leaning forward, trying to make me look at her. 'I remember you like dogs, Kristen.'

'Sharks,' I said, 'and barracudas, not dogs.'

'A family would be nice,' Gram said.

Too late, I thought.

‘But not today,’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘It will be a few days. I want Kristen to meet them first. They are not so far from here. You and Mrs. Cahill will be able to visit sometimes, Kristen.’

She stood up then. ‘I’ll stay connected,’ she said. ‘Would you like me to drive you to school now?’

I shook my head. ‘I can walk.’

She turned to go.

‘I said. ‘You have a sticker on the back of that shirt. X-L.’

She tried to look over her shoulder.

‘Extra-large,’ I said, feeling mean.

You cannot wear those things,’ Kristen told him after they had fed the cat and were walking along the road. ‘I’m not going to march along the beach with someone who-’

‘You said you wanted to go out on the rocks,’ Noah said.

‘Not with a baby who has beach slippers on his feet,’ she told him, grinning.

He grinned back, looking down at his feet. ‘My aunt said I would come back with cuts from the bar-nackles...’

‘Barnacles,’ she said. ‘Not bar-nackles.’

‘Same thing.’ He reached down to pull off Mr. Meyer’s slippers and toss them into the marshes.

She nodded. ‘Do not worry, they will still be there when we get back. Nobody in the world is going to want them.’

She led him down the path, across the sand, toward the jetty, and began to hop along the rocks. ‘See,’ she said, looking back. ‘Nothing to it.’

He followed her slowly, one foot at a time, wincing.

‘Didn’t you ever walk around barefoot in Hungary?’ She asked.

‘Certainly not,’ he said. ‘Do you think we were poor, that we had no shoes?’

She was laughing again, thinking about her feet, tough as leather, and Tom, his first summer, going barefoot. She settled herself on the gray triangular rock, way out, with Noah next to her, the sun on her face, and the sound of the water lapping against the rocks.

‘I want to tell you something,’ she said after a while. ‘I have stars on my bedroom ceiling. My mother passed them all up for me when I was a baby. She told my father she was making a world for me. She said she wanted to give me the entire world.’

Noah was not looking at her, his head was turned, but he was sitting there so still, so unmoving, she knew how hard he was listening.

‘I bring one with me to Ridgway every year,’ she said. ‘I counted. There are dozens of them left on my ceiling. I will be thirty or forty before they are all used up.’

He nodded a little.

‘I never told anyone,’ She said. ‘Not even Poppy. I give them presents to me from my mother, every year on my birthday, in July.’ She took a breath. It was so nice to tell someone about the stars. It was so nice to talk about her mother as if she, Kristen, were like everyone else, like everyone who had a mother.

‘I know your mother is dead,’ he said, looking at her now, reaching out for the tiniest second to touch her shoulder. ‘My aunt told me.’

Kristen squinted a little, looking out at a curl of smoke from a freighter far out. She waited for him to say something more about them, but when he did not, she began again. ‘My mother had something wrong with her heart. It was too big. She died right in Poppy’s bedroom on a sunny day.’ She took a breath. ‘I think that’s an all-right way to die, but it’s not all right that I don’t remember her.’

‘A picture?’ he asked. ‘You have a picture?’

‘Poppy has a book with her films, but they are blurry, and I do not know what her voice was like. You know?’

She could see his teeth chewing on his lower lip. She opened the paper bag from Gram: two sandwiches, Spam, apples, Social Tea cookies.

‘I hate this,’ she said, handing one of the sandwiches to him. ‘Gram does too. After the war, we are never going to have one can

of Spam again. And Poppy says if we have any left in the kitchen cabinet, he is going to throw them right in the ocean.'

Noah had a mouthful of it. 'I like this,' he said. 'I like everything. My grandmother, Nagymamma, loved to cook for me.

She said I was her best...' He closed his eyes, trying to think. 'Customer,' Kristen said, watching him nod, as she tried to get her mouth around the word. 'Nahj...'

'It means a big mother, grandmother. The Nagy part just means big.'

Kristen took a tiny piece of Spam and tossed it into the water. 'For the fish,' she said. 'They probably don't like it either.'

'You know my mother is dead too, and my father,' he said.

Both, she thought. She could not picture what it would be like with Poppy dead. So terrible...

'They are dead because they had a newspaper. They wrote sad things about Hitler and the Nazis. And their friends would give out the papers. They were caught one day. The Nazis came to the house...'

Kristen let out her breath. She did not want to look into his eyes, but she could not help it, she glanced at him quickly, but he did not look as if he would cry. He was squinting at the water, his eyes dry. 'Nagymamma came for me, for Christy and me, just before they came to our house. And there was no time, not one minute. We did not say goodbye, my mother was running into the kitchen, trying to burn small pieces of paper at the stove, and she looked over her shoulder and told us, 'Grannie,' and then she looked back because the stove was hot, and she was almost burning her fingers.'

Kristen was biting her lip, chewing on her lip, watching a small fish tear a piece of the Spam, and then another. . .

'It means 'I love you,' 'he said before she could ask. 'But if they loved us, they would not have done that, they would not have bothered with newspapers. And we do not even know what happened to them. Nagymamma just got a postcard from the police that they were dead.'

'Oh, Tom,' Kristen said, thinking how angry he looked, thinking she was angry too. Poppy should have stayed home.

‘And we went to Austria, Christy, and me, in the back of Mr. Kovacs’s car, and then across to Switzerland. Mr. Kovacs promised he was going to sneak us across Europe. In Switzerland, Christy was sick with’-he touched his face-’ marks.’

‘Chickenpox?’

He shook his head.

‘Measles.’

‘Yes, and we had been traveling for so long, and Christy had a fever, a big fever, I knew it. I could not tell anyone.’ He shook his head, and Kristen could see him making fists of his hands.

‘We still had to cross the mountains into France,’ he said. ‘Mr. Kovacs was pretending we were his children, and the Nazis were there, right there.’ He was almost breathless, telling her. ‘We had to get to the ship that would take us to America.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘I was afraid they would not let Christy go.’

Kristen could not look at him. She tore off another piece of Spam for the fish and the crust of her bread.

‘In France, she was so thirsty. Her face was red, and she was burning.’ Noah stood up, balancing himself on the rock, watching the ship, a little closer now. He pointed to the end of the jetty, across the water. ‘Christy is in France, and so are the Nazis.’

‘But how...’

Noah sighed. ‘We were waiting for the ship to take us to America, and this lady who was helping us, this lady with a long gray dress that went to the ground and across...’ He raised his hands to his head. ‘She was wearing a white...’ He stopped and frowned.

‘Something on her head?’ Kristen asked. ‘Was it a nun?’

‘Yes. And she said, ‘This girl is sick. She belongs to a hospital and not on a ship. She will give the sickness to everyone else.’

‘Measles.’

‘Yes, but I said it was not measles. I said she could not go to a hospital, but later I fell asleep, and they took her, and I did not even say goodbye.’

Kristen swallowed.

‘Now Christy is in France until the war is over. The war may last forever, and Christy is in a convent, with the lady in the gray dress, and the Nazis are right there, and suppose they find out about our newspaper in Hungary?’

‘Wait, Tom,’ Kristen began. ‘Is not Hungary far away from

France? How would they know?’

Noah did not stop. ‘Nagymamma said to stay together, no matter what. She said if we did, we would have a family.’

He looked around and picked up the bag with the apples.

20

It was late on Monday night. Still, in shorts and a shirt, Kristen lay under her red quilt looking up at the sky. She could see Orion’s Belt and the W of Cassiopeia. They were sharp and clear among the other stars in the dark sky. It was a beautiful night, and finally, she and Noah were going to watch for convoys.

She thought about it a little uneasily. They had not talked about Kristen’s going to Europe since that day at the beach. He had forgotten, she told herself, or he had thought it over by now and knew she had been lying.

She turned to the bed, trying to put it out of her mind. Everything was ready for tonight, on the floor. A sweater, two towels, her sneakers tucked in one side of her beach bag, and two bottles of soda jammed into the other side.

If only Gram would go to sleep. Vaguely she heard Gram’s radio, the end of Lux Radio Theatre, and then music. ‘Would you like to swing on a star?’ She could not keep her eyes open.

Then suddenly she was awake, wide awake. It seemed extremely late, midnight, one o’clock. Gram’s radio was off, and all the lights. Kristen reached for the screen and pushed it up and out.

She dropped into the rowboat and pushed herself along under the porches. In the light that spilled out from the less of Mrs. Colgan’s blackout shades, she could see a mess of sand crabs hanging on to the pilings.

And at the Smiths,' just silence. She sat there as wide awake as if it were the middle of the morning, so angry at herself for sleeping, so disappointed Noah was asleep, she could have cried.

'Too much crying,' she said aloud.

'Too much talking to yourself,' a voice said, so close she jumped.

Noah dropped into the boat. He was clumsy and splashed water over the side. 'Because of the cat,' he said.

She leaned over until she could see the cat's face, its eyes peering out from the front of his open jacket. 'Cats hate the water.'

'This one does not. I thought you would not come.'

She opened her mouth, ready to lie, but raised one shoulder instead. 'I fell asleep.'

Noah nodded. 'It is hard to stay awake sometimes.'

Kristen pushed the boat out from under the porches. 'Here is what we will do. We will cut across the bay. That way we can stay away from the surf.'

'But it is closer the other way.'

'Yes, but it is harder to fight the surf than the bay. If you are going far you want to save your arms.'

He nodded, watching her pull on the oars.

'Will you teach me to swim?' he asked after a while.

She blinked. She had been thinking again about Poppy... Poppy on a troopship watching her swim toward him. It was a wonderful dream. 'Swim?' she repeated. 'Yes. But why can't you swim?'

'I did not have an ocean,' he said. Like Lynnnatta in Detroit, she thought.

'I had a river, the Danube.' He leaned forward. 'It runs between Buda and Pest, but the river is not blue like the waltz. It is gray, and sometimes silver.'

Kristen did not say anything. She had never heard of Budapest split up that way in two halves. She had heard of 'The Blue

Danube,' though. It was one of the songs in her music book for the piano.

It was hard to row now. The marshes were closing in around them, and there was the dry rustle of the reeds hitting the sides of the boat and scraping the bottom.

She could see Playland now in the back of them on Ninety-ninth Street, the roller coaster, a dark skeleton, and the Ferris wheel rising behind it. In front, the boardwalk was misty, the tall lights painted black toward the sea, so German subs could not spot ships in the water nearby.

'How long?' Noah asked.

'Long?'

'To learn to swim.' He leaned forward. 'I want to go with you to Europe.'

She opened her mouth. Tell him right now, she told herself.

Tell him it is just too far, the water's too rough.

'Kristen?'

She sighed. 'You could never learn to swim in the Atlantic in the summer. It would take months, years to be good enough, fast enough.'

'If you can do it...'

'I've been swimming since I was four,' she said. 'And remember that afternoon when I went into the surf after you, I was nearly swept under.'

He did not answer.

She took a breath, trying to think of something to convince him. 'You even said you thought I was a better swimmer.'

In the dark, she could just see him shaking his head. 'I know you are a good swimmer,' he said slowly. 'I know you were coming for me.' He stopped for a moment. 'I was... I do not know the word...'

How could she tell him Christy now? He was the first friend she had ever made. You could not count Lynnnatta... Lynnnatta, who had been in Ridgway every summer from the time they could walk, from the time they could talk. Tom, a friend, a good friend, Kristen's best friend.

'Teasing' is the word,' he said.

She looked at him. His face was so serious. One hand was in his jacket, petting the sleeping cat. 'You do not want to take me,' he said. 'You think I will not be able to keep up.'

'No, it is not that. Really,' she said.

'You think I am a coward because of the plane that day.'

She kept shaking her head.

He leaned forward. 'It was just that I was thinking it was Europe.' His lip trembled a little. 'In Budapest, we had a yellow house with birds.' He moved his fingers. 'They were small birds.'

Blue ones painted on the house painted on the window shutters. I had an orange cat too, we called him Pap, after the pepper. He looks like this cat.' He tried to smile. 'And my grandmother, Nagymamma, was always telling me to do this and that, like your grandmother.'

Kristen bit her lip, trying to think of what to say.

'I have only Christy left. Christy is my family.' He stopped then and pointed. 'Look.'

She turned and saw it too. The first ship looked like a flat chunk of coal on the water, so far out she was not even sure it was a ship. But then a second one appeared on the horizon, moving out of the mist. It was a huge ship, its top tangle of turrets and masts.

For a moment, they did not say anything. They sat there watching the rowboat rocking gently until the ship disappeared into the mist again.

'That was a troopship,' she said at last.

Noah leaned back. 'Yes,' he said, 'I know. I will learn to swim, Kristen. to keep up, and we will go out there, out to a ship.'

And- then I will go back to Europe to find Christy.'

She began to grow again, turning the boat toward the canal, her mouth dry.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Two of Izzy's candies filled my mouth as I went around the side of the house. I did not mean to listen or to be sneaky. Ordinarily, I did that a lot. I would standstill in the hall to hear what the stucco woman had to say to her telephone friend. I would flip pages on the teacher's desk to see what disaster of a mark I had gotten in social studies or social attitude. I would pass by classmates in the schoolyard to find out what they had to say about that kid Kristen Copses.

But this time I was on my way to find Izzy, to give her a picture I had drawn Izzy flipping a pancake that would land on my plate. Izzy's pancakes were wonderful: covered with apples cut into small, sweet chunks, the pancakes themselves so light I must have eaten a half dozen. In the picture Izzy is laughing, the turner in one hand, just under the cross-stitched motto on the wall:

LOVE THE COOK.

I had changed the motto, though. I have written I DO LOVE THE COOK. I had drawn the I DO in the palest pink so that you would have to study it, study it hard, or you would not notice.

One afternoon Izzy and I walked up to the old cemetery on the hill where her parents were buried. We picked white daisies and Queen Anne's lace and put them in the jar in front of a small stone next to her parents' grave. Izzy ran her hand over the inscription on the bottom: JOSEPH REGAN, SIX DAYS. 'I always wanted more children,' she said. 'For me, for John, for Green's.' She patted the stone. 'I wanted a baby for each corner of my house. It just never happened after this.'

Down the hill, I could hear the Old Man bellow at Green's. 'Do they always fight?' I asked. 'Or...' -I hesitated, trying to sound as if I did not care, as if it were not important-' do you think it's because I'm here?'

Izzy grinned at me. 'It does seem worse this summer,' she said. 'But they have to find their way.'

I had thought about that for days, 'worse this summer,' but now, as I rounded the house, I stepped back against the wall, warm from the sun, smelling faintly of paint, and closed my eyes.

'How can we let her go?' Izzy was saying.

‘We can’t,’ the Old Man said.

My heart began to pound so hard I thought it would come through my chest.

A mother, I thought. M.

‘She belongs here,’ Izzy said. ‘Green’s feels it too.’

B, belong. G, girl. S, sister. W for want, W for the wish, W for Wouldn’t it be lovely? My head was spinning.

‘I’ve been thinking about it,’ Izzy said. ‘The winter house in town is too small. We would have to put a room on for her.’

I do not need a room. A couch. Sleeping bags.

‘Without the room, I do not think the agency would let us keep her. She must have space for herself.’

For a moment they were quiet.

I leaned my head back, my hand to my mouth.

‘How about this?’ Izzy said. ‘You could call Lenny Mitchell to work with you. There’s space in the back for a great room for Kristen.’

‘A big window for her,’ the Old Man said. ‘We could do it in weeks.’

‘Sooner than weeks,’ Izzy said. ‘Early fall.’

‘Yes. Even Green’s would help.’

‘I’ll call-’ ‘You’ll call the agency.’

‘How long will it take them?’

‘She’ll have to go back first,’ Izzy said, the words tumbling over each other.

‘But just for a brief time.’

I leaned my head against the wall. I had never been so happy.

‘A daughter,’ Izzy said.

‘Yes,’ the Old Man said. ‘We’ll have a daughter.’

From where I stood, I could see the mountain towering over me. The stucco woman’s voice was in my head: ‘She’s a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.’

Before the end of the summer, I decided, I was going to climb that mountain, get to the top, raise my arms, and shout to the entire world, ‘I have a family. I belong.’

In the back of me, there was a noise. ‘Yahoo!’

Green’s. I jumped afoot.

The voices stopped, but no one knew I had heard.

Early fall and I would be a daughter.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Never mind that we did not have much money. Never mind that I did not even know exactly how to get to the house in Laurel Highlands; I would find it. Never mind that the house was not mine.

Please do not mind, I said to Izzy and the Old Man in my head.

I ticked off what to pack, what to do, counting on my fingers: Bring all the food in the cabinet over the sink, a map, winter clothes, piles of anything warm I could find in the house, then get gas at the first exit off the highway.

Gram was in the kitchen making cocoa. ‘It’ll be dark soon,’ she said.

‘That’s all right,’ I told her. ‘We like the dark. It is like velvet.’

‘That it is,’ she said. ‘And we like snow, too.’

I bit my lip. Dark and snow. One problem after another.

‘How about marshmallows in our cocoa?’ Gram asked.

‘Left-hand cabinet,’ I said.

To begin with, Gram and I had to get off Long Island, I knew that we had to get to Route Seventeen and exit at Ninety, and after that, we were home free. I had walked that last few mile’s dozens

of times: the grocery store off the ramp, the road curving over the hill. We would cross the bridge, and the house would be there, nestled in the trees opposite Old Man's Mountain.

I could do it in my sleep.

I called back over my shoulder, reminding Gram where we were going: 'It's a house in the Copses, Gram,' I said. 'A house on the river, a safe house.'

I swept half boxes of cereal off the counter into a carton, cans of chicken noodle soup, sugar, salt, anything I could find to eat, then, wasting precious time, went up to the attic for Gram's old Christmas ornaments.

I heard a car and froze on the top step. The sound of the motor grew louder and then gradually disappeared. My heart was beating fast.

Stop, I told myself. The hot cocoa woman was far away, in her house somewhere, scarfing up her dinner, littering her sweatsuit with crumbs.

But I knew we should leave as quickly as we could. I had learned that when I had run before. The first hours made all the difference, the hours before anyone knew you were gone.

I scurried into the attic, found the box of ornaments, and pulled it after me to the stairs.

When I finished, the car was piled so high it was hard to see out the windows. It was completely dark now, except for the white flakes hitting the window. In the kitchen Gram was bent over the table, a cup of cocoa in one hand, her knife in the other, and the smooth chunk of wood in front of her.

'Gram?' I reached out for my cup of cocoa and sipped it, feeling the warmth of it on my lip, the sweetness of the marshmallow in my mouth. I touched her shoulder. 'We can't wait anymore.'

Rubbing her eyes, she glanced toward her bedroom. I knew she wanted to take a nap. I did too; I was tired now and thinking of the long trip ahead of us was too much.

'We'll have an adventure,' I said. 'You, and me, and Henry.' I hesitated. 'If we don't go, they might make me live somewhere else.'

She stood up. 'We'll go, then.' She looked around in the kitchen, touched the table, the back of the chair. 'Yes,' she said.

'We'll go.'

'Can you drive?' I asked.

Please let the snow stop, I thought.

She smiled. 'Of course.'

I made one last trip to the car, carrying her knives, the small drill, pieces of wood, and then I was back, hoisting Henry onto my shoulder. 'No biting if you don't mind,' I told him.

We went outside, Gram looking up at the sky, holding out her hands to catch the flakes while I opened the garage doors, and then we were off, skidding our way down the street.

Suddenly- the snow did stop, and we saw a moon over our heads. 'It looks dusty,' Gram said. The houses stood out as clearly as if it were daytime; trees threw sharp shadows across the snowy lawns, and the dark streets curved like ribbons through that white world. I put my head back against the headrest, thinking we had done it. The hardest part was over.

'Do you know about directions?' I asked.

She turned her head to one side. 'It depends. I know the way to the end of Long Island; I know how to get upstate...'

'Upstate, yes.'

'Across the Triborough Bridge.' She frowned, looking worried. 'Isn't that, right?'

'I think so.' Henry was scratching around in the back, trying to make room for himself.

'There's a map somewhere.' Gram leaned across me, one hand off the wheel.

'I can find it,' I said quickly, reaching for the glove compartment. A tiny pinprick of light appeared as I snapped it open. The small space inside was filled with all kinds of things: one of Gram's silk gloves, a couple of dimes, a squished box of tissues, and at the very bottom, the map of Philadelphia State.

I unfolded it, spreading it out against the door of the glove compartment. It was a mass of color and lines and tiny words that were hard to see in that dim light. I bent over it, squinting. Palisades Parkway. Route 17. It was all there, one line after another, leading me home to Laurel Highlands.

I looked up as I heard the blare of a horn, and then a car swerved past us, its lights sweeping over the road. 'Are you all, right?' I asked Gram.

'Right as rain,' she said.

I sat back and closed my eyes, thinking of Izzy, drawing them all in my mind, wondering if they would think I was doing a terrible thing.

'It belongs to you,' the Old Man had said. Would he say that now? I wondered.

Why not? said Green is in my mind.

Izzy's face in front of me. Would she say, 'Do it, Kristen'?

I thought she would.

I was doing it anyway.

Suddenly I sat up straight. How much gas did we have? It was a miracle to see the Mobil sign off to the right. I touched Gram's arm, pointing, and we pulled off the road, waiting for the attendant to fill the tank while I counted out my running money.

'Good idea,' Gram said, and I had to smile at her. She would have driven until the tank was empty and might never have remembered.

I was hungry now, hungry. The hot chocolate had not lasted long. And I had not had lunch. I could hurry inside for a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar. I glanced out the rearview mirror to see a car pulling up in the back of us at the pump. The man was impatient, tapping his horn for us to get out of the way. There would be no time to buy anything, not even enough time to rummage through the back to find bags of food.

I thought of the hot cocoa woman. She had come up the path tomorrow afternoon to get me, trying to smile, acting as if this would be a lovely afternoon tea at that woman's house-what was her name? Eleanor. When we did not answer the bell, she would go around

the back to see if we were in Gram's garden. But soon enough she had figured out that we were not there. She would stand on tiptoe to look in the window of the garage, and it would be empty. If we were lucky, she would wait awhile. She might think we would be back any minute. But the minutes would stretch out to an hour, and then she would know. She would know. And then she would call the police.

My hands were damp.

Calm down, I made Green is tell me in my mind. You knew all this before you started.

But Gram turned onto the parkway now, and it would not be that long before we crossed the bridge and left Long Island, twenty minutes, and the hot cocoa woman would just be getting ready for bed.

Next to me, in the dim light, I could not see the lines around Gram's eyes, or the ones crisscrossing her forehead. I could pretend we were taking a moonlight ride in the Silver Bullet; pretending Gram was all right and we were not running.

The last time I ran was two weeks after what had happened in Laurel Highlands. It was September, still hot, with the sun beating down from early morning until dark. It was hard to move, hard to think; everything hurt in my head and my chest. I had had enough of the stucco woman, and I knew she had had enough of me. All I could think about was being somewhere cold, a place where I could scoop up a chunk of snow and crush it against my teeth, a place to take the blame and the pain go away.

I left at night after the stucco woman had fallen asleep. It took me hours to get off the road, to find a bus. I was gone for days before they caught me.

We would be luckier this time.

There were two letters the next day, one from Poppy and one from Lynnnatta. Kristen managed to pick them up from the mail carrier before he even hit Cross Bay Boulevard. She had been waiting on the corner for more than an hour, watching the street as far down as she could see, wondering if Lynnnatta had gotten the letter she had sent. She had told her about Noah and the cat he was calling Pap.

Kristen yawned, tired from last night. Even after she had tiptoed through the dark kitchen at two or three in the morning and slipped under the red quilt again, she had not been able to sleep. She had tossed from one side to the other, thinking about the troopship, and Poppy, and what she could do about the lie she had told Tom.

Now she took the letters and went straight to Lynnnatta's house, past the bedroom where Pap slept now, a small orange circle on Eddie's pillow. She climbed the attic stairs and shoved up the window as high as it could go, then took a quick look at the beach. It was still empty at this hour of the morning, litter baskets clean, the sand smooth and even. She had time, plenty of time. She wanted to stretch out this moment with two letters to read. It would be like sucking on a red LifeSaver until it melted into a thin little circle.

She looked at them both, Lynnnatta's as filthy as the first letter she had sent. But this time it was in ink that was blotted and watery as if drops had been spattered on it.

Her father's letter was much neater, much cleaner, and is beautifully clear writing said, 'Miss Elizabeth Mary Mollahan.'

Kristen slid her fingernail under the flap and slid out the tissue-paper letter.

'Kristen.' it began. 'My dearest daughter.'

She closed her eyes and held the letter her father had held in his own hands just a few days ago.

She read the rest of it quickly, so fast the words ran together. He never mentioned that she had not said goodbye. He never said that he minded, or did not mind, only about the war is over, and everything the same again.

I have a picture of you in my head as clear as a photograph to take with me overseas. You are in the boat, and frowning, staring at a skate fish just before you set him free. By the time you read this, Kristen Billy, I will be on my way across the ocean, the faster there, the foster home.

She thought her heart would stop. Her father out there, crossing the Atlantic, was part of a convoy, even on the troopship she and Noah had seen last night.

She could not even think about it. She looked at the end of the letter.

Hug the waves for me, and the beach on 101st Street.

And- then at the very bottom, hug Gram too. She loves you, Kristen. more than you know.

Kristen wiped her eyes. It was a good thing she had Lynnnatta's letter to think about next, and not having to hug Gram.

She looked back at Poppy's letter. At the very bottom he had written:

Do not forget to finish those books, Madeline, and A Tale of Two Cities, and especially The Three Musketeers.

Kristen frowned. Strange that Poppy had written that. He had read Madeline to her a hundred years ago when she was six. How could he have forgotten? And he did not know she was reading The Three Musketeers. She had just taken it from the library on Thursday.

She put her father's letter down carefully near the chimney and opened Lynnnatta's. It started most strangely. No opening, the way Sister Jillien had taught Kristen in school. No- 'Dear Kristen.' Just please go to my living room and get Eddie's picture. Send it right away even if you must ask your grandmother for the money. Tell her I will pay her back when the war is over. I cannot member what Eddie looks like and now he is missing in action, isn't it strange, on a beach? It was D-Day. The telegram did not come until this morning. He never even got any candy.

Lynnnatta-

Kristen sat there for another minute; then she went down the stairs feeling so dizzy her feet did not even touch the steps. She went into the Dillons' living room and reached for Eddie's picture. Her hands were shaking, and she knocked it off the table, grabbing it before it hit the floor. Nice catch, Kristen.

Eddie would say.

Then she was out the door and down the street. She could not wait to find Gram, to tell her this awful thing that had happened to Eddie Dillon, to ask for wrapping paper and stamps for the picture.

She went down the road and in the back door, but before she could begin, Gram had started. 'Change your clothes, Kristen.

and get your hat,' she said. 'Mrs. Colgan told me that Eddie

Dillon is missing and-'

'How does she know?' Kristen asked.

They could not watch for ships that night. Mr. Colgan had borrowed Gram's rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr. Meyer was caulking at the bottom of his.

'Want to go to the movie instead?' Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths' porch.

'Well...'

'We won't stay for the whole thing,' she told him. 'We'll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and...' She tried to remember the newest movie at Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking into the sunshine.

'How much does it cost?' he asked.

'Not a cent. I told you, we are sneaking in.' She could see he looked worried. 'Unless you're afraid.'

'I am not afraid of anything.'

'Well, then.' Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of raisin rings. **SOMEONE TALKED**, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

'It's hot as poker on the balcony,' she told him. 'They always leave the door open up there.'

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they would have to climb.

'Don't be silly,' she said, knowing what he was thinking.

'Don't look down.'

‘It must be two stories,’ he said. ‘You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.’

‘Three stories,’ she said, daring him.

‘I am not afraid,’ he said. ‘I am just telling you.’

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn’t you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up occasionally?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

‘Race you to the top,’ she said.

He opened his eyes. ‘Sure.’

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. ‘That was so simple,’ he said.

She leaned over. ‘We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.’

He grinned back. ‘What is up, Doc?’ he said.

She started to laugh.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It is your voice. It sounds so... so...’

‘Hungarian,’ he said. ‘It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.’

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut cheese. If she tried it now-that is, if she had still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And- then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on too little pieces of wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman's bakery.

And- she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mail carrier that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy... makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she did not watch anymore.

Noah was not watching either.

'Don't you like the movie?' she asked.

He shook his head.

'We could leave-' she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs and the beam from the matron's flashlight bouncing up toward them.

'I was on a ship like that,' Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he got here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

'Tom,' Kristen began.

'Are you here again?' the matron asked. 'I told you last time it is dangerous to climb those steps, and you cannot keep coming in here when you do not pay. It was one thing when you were six years old, but...'

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee's light she could see Tom's face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

'It's nine o'clock,' she said. 'Gram is going to have a fit'

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman's. 'Same cookies,' Noah said, breathless, and then around the corner of the As Good as New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute, and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah was not crying anymore. They were both laughing, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

'Tomorrow,' Kristen called after him. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Yes,' he said, going down toward the Smiths'.

It means-' she began and broke off. How could she explain? Besides, they had to be quiet. She held one finger up to her mouth and reached for the key around her neck. She pulled him inside and shut the door quickly behind them.

'Why?' he asked, whispering.

She raised her shoulders, thinking about how to tell him.

'It's the war,' she began. 'The people are gone now.'

She saw his eyes, blue in the dim light, sad or frightened. 'Like Budapest,' he said.

Kristen shook her head a little. 'Lynnnatta... that is the girl, said I could. Give me the key. I am being careful.'

She looked at the winter shutters tight over the windows, and breathed in, trying not to cry over the cat, or her father, or Lynnnatta's being gone.

'Hot,' Noah said.

Kristen shook her head, and then she realized how wet she was, the ends of her hair still dripping.

Noah was frowning. 'She is too little for food,' he said slowly. 'She needs milk,' and, even more slowly, 'She needs her mother.'

Kristen nodded a quick flash in her mind of the stars on her ceiling and her mother. Then she sat back on her heels. Noah was right. The kitten needed milk. She thought about going for it.

She would have to walk to the bayside and sneak past Gram to take a bottle out of the refrigerator.

She could see Gram's name, fourth on her problem list. It came after First: Lies; Second: Daydreaming; and Third: Friends, need. And now maybe she would cross the whole thing out and move Gram up to number one. It would serve her right.

Gram would not care even if she knew. She was not talking much to Kristen either, mumbling once, '... terrible that you didn't come back to say goodbye to your father.'

Kristen knew it was terrible, she did not need Gram to tell her that. The last two days she had awoken with a pain in her chest, like a woodpecker banging away at her ribs. If only she had gone home on Saturday morning, or even to the railroad station. Just a few minutes would have made all the difference. And now she might not see Poppy for years, she might be grown up and he would not even recognize her.

She had written to him, though, along with an 'I'm sorry' letter. She had sent it to the address that he had left on her bed. It was a strange address, full of numbers and letters, and did not even tell where he was.

Suddenly she felt cold there in the shade. She moved her head, finding a shaft of sunlight that came through the boardwalk up above. It was warm on her face. In front of her, a woman went past, humming 'The Last Time I Saw Paris.'

And Noah was not just looking at the water anymore. He was writing something on that pad. What? She could see a ship way

out. He was checking out troop movements. She tried to think about what else the spies checked out when she saw them in the movies. She wondered if she could get up a little closer.

Tom's head was bent over his paper, and he was writing fast. Kristen crawled around the side of the rusty fence an inch at a time. If he heard her if he turned around...

She pictured herself as an undercover agent. If Tom, Nazi Spy Tom, turned, he would reach into the bag, pull out his revolver with the silencer. He would shoot her, of course. Never mind. It was for the good of the country. She would win a medal.

She could not see anything on his paper. His shoulder was in the way. She moved over a bit, and another inch or two toward him, and there, she could see the writing on the lined white paper:

Dere Ont Eva and Onkl Emery, Strange. A secret code. She frowned, suddenly knowing what it was, feeling disappointment. A letter, just a letter, not a spy thing at all... just that he was the worst speller in the world, worse than even she was. She let out her breath.

No. The tan purse. She could run down to Milton at the grocery store. She slapped her pocket. The purse was gone. Of course, it was in the water. All the money she had saved for all the cookies this summer, and the movies, and it was gone. All those months of saving. But Lynnatta's letter was still in her pocket. She could feel it, as wet as the cat. How could she ever read it? She took it out slowly, carefully, and spread it on the counter to dry.

'I will get milk.' Noah reached for the back door. 'Do not worry,' he said, but it sounded like worry.

He was as careful as she would have been, opening the door less than an inch, peering out, then pushing it all the way. A moment later, the door closed gently, and he was gone.

Where was he going? To Mrs. Meyer's? To Milton's? He had certainly learned to find his way around quickly.

The cat mewed. On the kitchen floor, she was a shadow, so puny she could be only a few weeks old. Poor little thing. Kristen could have cried looking at her. She scooped her up, her face a striped pansy, her ears tiny tags of orange. 'Coming,' Kristen said, 'milk is coming. Do not worry.'

He heard her and turned. Good grief. 'I lost my, um...' she began, and then she heard the noise.

It was like a mosquito at first, a thin, high sound. It was not a mosquito, though, of course not. The noise grew louder, so loud she could feel the boardwalk tremble with it, could feel the vibration in her chest.

A plane was coming in over the water, so low it was just above the waves, its wings tilting. She could see people standing on the beach watching Mrs. Colgan far down on the beach, looking up, her mouth a perfect round O. And a fat lady with wobbly legs, shading her eyes to see as the plane roared over the beach. It spread a huge, dark shadow, sand flattening under it and spewing up along the sides.

Kristen backed against the boardwalk steps, her heart thumping in her chest, her head bursting with the sound of it.

The sand was in her mouth and nose, stinging her eyes.

The plane gathered speed, gathered height, was up, over them and passed. And then she realized. It was a trainer plane, only a trainer plane from the navy yard.

But Noah could not know that. She could see his face, his blue eyes huge, the pad went out of his hand, blowing across the beach.

Without thinking, she went toward him, spitting out sand, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. The noise of the plane was fading, and she could see Tom's hands were trembling a little.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. 'It's all right,' she told him. Then everything was still, except for the waves rolling in on the shore in front of them.

'It's all right,' she said again. 'It was not a Nazi. I saw it.' She made a circle with one finger. 'The round insignia thing with the star.'

He did not look at her. It almost seemed as if he had not seen her as he kept watching the plane, a speck now in the distance.

She stepped back. She could still feel her heart pounding.

'It was a trainer plane.' She pointed across the shoreline toward Coney Island. 'From the naval base.'

He was not listening. He followed his paper across the beach, and suddenly she remembered he had caught her spying on him again. Feeling her face redden, knowing she would not go near him for

the rest of the summer, she went up the boardwalk steps and started for home.

She wandered down the hall with the cat in her arms, running her hand over her back, feeling the knobs of her bony spine. The first door was to Eddie's bedroom. She pushed it open with one finger. It was a little lighter in there, the shutters not as tight against the windows.

She could see Gram's hand, soft and plump on the pillows. Gram's wedding ring was a silver sliver that had made a deep ridge on her finger. 'I was skinny until you started school,' she had told Kristen once, laughing. 'Then I started to eat and found out how tasty the food was.'

Kristen could not picture it, could not picture Gram skinny, and swimming across Jamaica Bay. Her father had told her Gram had done that. 'I watched her when I was small,' he had said. 'She had a braid on her waist, and she was a seal in the water.'

Gram was sitting on the couch in the living room when Kristen came in. She was listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen liked to listen to Portia too.

She and Lynnnatta had sent away Portia's picture. They had written a letter straight to WEA radio station just before Lynnnatta had left. Lynnnatta said stars like Portia always had films of themselves lying around.

Right now, on the radio, Portia's husband, Walter, was a prisoner of war in Germany, and he had just thought of an escape plan. He was going to hide in a small boat. Then when an American ship passed, he would signal it with a flashlight and row out to freedom.

Kristen sank on one end of the couch, as far away from Gram as she could get, to listen.

Gram still had the braid, but now it was twisted around in the back of her head in a bun. At night, she would take out the bobby pins, run her fingers through her hair, and brush it.

Gram's hand was moving. Kristen watched out of the corner of her eye as the plump fingers walked across the pillows, and Gram's arm came up around her.

Kristen was about to shrug her arm away, about to get up, but it felt so good to be sitting there in that circle that she moved closer. A moment later, she was crying, and she did not even try to stop.

‘I know,’ Gram said.

Kristen shook her head. ‘No, you don’t.’

Gram touched her sleeve, making tiny pleats in the cotton with her fingers.

‘We were going to go fishing,’ Kristen said, ‘and to the movies. We were going to do everything.’

‘Your father said the same thing,’ Gram said.

Kristen looked up. ‘Really?’

Gram nodded. ‘Your eyes will be red.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Yes, you will,’ Gram said. ‘We’re going out to dinner.’

‘Trixie’s Restaurant?’

‘Of course not. There is a war on and not a penny to spare for such foolishness-’ Gram broke off. ‘We’re going to the Smiths’.’
Kristen sat up straight. She could feel her mouth suddenly go dry. ‘I’m not-’

‘Mr. Meyer said you did a magnificent job on his headlight.’

‘I don’t-’

‘There’s a surprise for you, Mrs. Meyer said.’

Kristen bit her lip. Some surprise. As if she could not guess. Tom. Kristen moved back to the end of the couch. She was not going to the Smiths’ house, not in a million squillion years.

‘I am not...’ Kristen began again and stopped. She always loved to go to the Smiths for dinner. Sometimes there was a flounder Mr. Meyer had caught that morning, with corn on the cob, and a cake with jelly icing on top. How could she say she did not want to go, that she knew about Tom? And worse, that he knew about her. Gram would not take no for an answer. Never.

Gram was up from the couch now. ‘We’ll have to see what happens to Walter tomorrow,’ she said. ‘They’re certainly stretching this out.’

Kristen followed her into the bathroom and watched as Gram opened her compact and took out her powder puff.

Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror. Her eyes were red, and so was her nose.

‘Here.’ Gram ran a washcloth under the tap. ‘Nice and cool.’ She held it up to Kristen’s eyes. ‘Better in a minute, wait and see.’

Gram was right. Kristen held her head back and felt the coolness of the cloth on her eyes and her cheeks. In her back, she could hear the news. An American general had told reporters he needed only three hours of mild weather and the army could break out of Normandy and start across France.

Strange, Kristen thought, in France, the weather was gray and cloudy, and the Americans were caught on a beach that was wet and cold. Here in Ridgway. It was beautiful.

She checked the mirror again. No one would guess she had been crying.

Gram took her powder puff and waved it over Kristen’s nose. ‘I hear the church bells. We are supposed to be there at six. Come on.’

Kristen walked out behind her, taking the smallest steps she could. She dreaded having to meet Tom, meet him at last. She would not say a word to him. She would talk to Mr. and Mrs. Meyer and not even look at him.

Mrs. Meyer was waiting at the door, excited, smiling.

‘Have I got a surprise for you,’ she said.

And behind her was Tom. Tom, with that mop of dark hair and blue eyes. She took a quick look at him. He was looking at her too. His mouth opened. ‘You are Kristen?’

‘Of course, she’s Kristen.’ Mrs. Meyer said.

Kristen raised one eyebrow and put on her ‘Too bad for you, Sister Jillien’ face. Usually, she was good at that, but halfway into the face, her eyes slid away because for the quickest second it looked as if Noah was going to laugh.

When she looked back, he was tapping his lip, looking at her, his eyebrows raised. What was that all about? she wondered. Noah was crazy.

But then Mr. Meyer was leading them to the table, his hand on Kristen's back, smiling. 'Sit here next to me,' he told Gram. 'And Kristen. my love, across from Tom, my nephew. Tom's here from my brother Emery's in Canada to spend the summer.' 'From Hungary,' Mrs. Meyer said at the same time.

'To be safe from the war.'

Noah looked up. He spoke to Gram, though, not even glancing at Kristen. 'From Budapest, two years ago.' The words sounded different on his tongue, soft, almost musical.

Mrs. Meyer shook her head. 'It was a long trip for Tom. Through Austria and Switzerland, across the mountains to France, then a ship...' She stopped for a breath.

'With Christy,' Noah said.

Mrs. Meyer's face suddenly looked different, older, sad. 'His eight-year-old sister was sick,' she told them. 'She's caught in France.'

Noah made a sound, said something.

Kristen took a quick look, but he was smearing margarine over a slice of bread, looking down. And then Mr. Meyer began to talk quickly, and so did Gram, and Kristen bent over her plate to bone the fish and begin on the corn. She was starving.

Noah must have been starving too. He bent over his plate; his hand made a fist around his fork. He ate fast, taking huge bites, shoveling it in.

Gram would have had a fit if she had done that.

He raised his head, and immediately she looked past him, toward the lemon cake on the counter, and beyond to the window. Outside, pairs of socks were hanging on the porch railing.

The water was flat and slick with the sun slanting over it.

'Isn't this perfect,' Mrs. Meyer said. 'Just as Lynnnatta leaves, Noah comes. You will have someone to fish with all summer, Kristen.'

Gram was staring at her. Kristen could feel her eyes. Gram thought she knew what Kristen was thinking, thought Kristen would not go to the beach with any boy, fish with him, go to the Cross-Bay Theatre...

What Gram did not know was that it was the other way around.

‘Yes,’ said Gram. ‘It is perfect. Isn’t it, Kristen?’

She did not look at Gram. She took a chunk of corn off the cob, with a bite as big as Tom’s. She certainly could not answer them with her mouth full.

Noah had finished his fish and corn and was into the peas now. Mounds of peas were falling off the edge of his fork. And suddenly he looked up and saw her watching him. He was laughing, bringing his hand up to his mouth. And just as suddenly, she knew what he was doing. He was reminding her of the lipstick, Gertz Department Store, FREE TAKE ONE. Good grief.

It was a good thing Mrs. Meyer was talking, otherwise, Kristen might just have jumped up to race out of there and never come back. But what was Mrs. Meyer saying? ‘Noah does not know the ocean. He does not know how to swim.’

‘And Kristen. ‘Mr. Meyer said, ‘swims like a mermaid.’

‘She’ll teach you, Tom,’ Mrs. Meyer said. ‘No one swims the way Kristen does.’

Teach him to swim-she could not believe it.

‘Except her grandmother,’ said Mr. Meyer.

Gram laughed. ‘I haven’t put my foot in the water since I taught Kristen to swim.’

Kristen remembered that, remembered paddling around in the water, listening as Gram held her feet lightly, pointing her big toes toward each other, angling her hands so the sides of her index fingers slid into the water first. ‘Everything makes a difference,’ Gram had said.

And on Friday night, they had shown her father. No life vest anymore, and by that time Kristen could dive. She went off the side of the porch, her toes digging into the railing for an instant, then pushing up, arms stretched, head down. She slid underneath smoothly

with the sound of the water in her ears, the taste of it on her tongue, up then, and swimming in front of the houses easily, as easily as she could walk.

Moments later, she climbed back up. Her father had wrapped her in a huge towel, hugging her and telling her how proud her mother would have been.

And now Gram was telling the Smiths about Poppy. 'I hope he's still at Fort Dix,' she said. In the back of them, the teakettle was whistling. Gram's face was sad. 'He will go to Europe soon, any day.

He has gone already. I hope it is not in Germany.'

Kristen stuffed her mouth with bread. She wanted to stuff her ears too. She did not want Gram to talk about it. She did not want to think about it.

Then Mrs. Meyer passed them slices of lemon cake, apologizing because it was made with margarine and not butter, and Noah began to eat again, two pieces, and then a third. He did not look at Kristen again, and she sat there thinking about him laughing at her, and wondering about his sister, Christy, and trying to pretend she did not notice he was there until they were finished, and it was time to go home.

Thursday. She had been ducking away from Noah for a week. It was just the opposite now. Everywhere she went, she saw Tom. Ahead of her, behind her, even coming out of Sherman's Bakery.

But right now, she had other things to think about. A letter from her father. They had received only a quick postcard: Arrived safely. Miss you terribly. We will be fishing this time next year. Letter follows. Best love, Poppy. Today there would be a real letter. She could see it in her mind, tissue-thin with a red, white, and blue border, the same as the letters Eddie Dillon sent home.

'If you could stop dreaming and finish your breakfast,' Gram said.

Kristen picked up her spoon. She could see something else too. Gram would be leaning over her shoulder, reading the letter, her lips moving slightly, reading even faster than she could.

Kristen ate her cereal without looking once into the bowl. Bits of cream were floating around in the milk, white things looking like tiny fish. She could almost feel them on her teeth.

She shuddered. The white things were floating around inside her now. She went out to the porch and leaned on the screen. The water was swollen this morning, the tide high.

She knew exactly what she would do. She would hang around on Cross Bay Boulevard, stop at Sherman's Bakery for a roll or a cookie. She would grab the mail carrier before he even got around to her grandmother on the bayside.

If only he would give her the letter.

She reached under her bed for her pad and pencil and the tan purse with the money she had saved all winter.

'Going to Sherman's,' she told Gram's back at the kitchen sink.

Gram made a tiny breathing sound, a 'no' sound, but before she could say she should not waste her money on cookies that tasted like cardboard, Kristen began, 'My money. My

Christmas, snow-shoveling, allowance-saving money.'

Gram's voice rose. 'Then do not forget sunburn lotion.

You will have blisters on your nose.'

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. She was out the door and up the road. Already it was hot, the tar shimmering in the haze, the sound of the cicadas beginning. 'Listen,' Poppy would say, 'it's the sound of summer.'

She wondered when she would see him again. The days stretched out in front of her like long gray sheets on a washing line.

Summer will be over and fall...

Kristen passed the As Good as New Shoppe on the corner. Everything in the window was just the same, the old coat and dusty straw hat, certainly not looking new, the flute and violin in back, and the stuffed dog that looked as if it would fall over any second.

Sherman's Bakery was near the end of Cross Bay Boulevard. It was dim and dusty, and Kristen could see through the screen that Mrs. Sherman had not gotten around to baking yet. The trays were almost empty. A strawberry-pink birthday cake stood on one shelf and a plate of pale sugar cookies on another. The cookies had

jelly in the middle, but the jelly would be hard by now, the juice drained out overnight.

Kristen stood there, hand on the screen door, squinting in the sun. The mail carrier was halfway up the next block. She could see him plodding along across the street.

She took a step, but Mrs. Sherman, hands floury, came out from the back and spotted her. 'Kristen,' she said. 'My first customer today.'

Kristen pulled open the door and went inside, glancing up at the poster over the glass counter: LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS. 'Not much left,' Mrs. Sherman said. 'Sticky buns later but try those jelly cookies for now.'

Kristen looked down at the cookies. Up close they looked worse, shrunk, and dry. She wondered which way the mail carrier was going. Toward the bay? Back along the boulevard?

'Can't get much better with the war on, you know,' Mrs. Sherman began, leaning against the counter.

Kristen nodded. If the mail carrier went toward the bay, he would turn before the bakery. She would miss him.

'I'll take a cookie,' Kristen said. 'Sure.'

'The egg man went into the service,' Mrs. Sherman said.

'I don't know how I'm going to get eggs now, or cheese.'

'My grandmother said I must be right home. I must stop her medicine.'

'Sick? Your grandmother's sick?'

The next thing she knew, Mrs. Sherman would be on her way to Grams with her dried-up cookies. 'Uh... no. It is my aunt

Celia. In Europe.'

Mrs. Sherman shook her head, clucking a little. 'What's the matter?'

She would never get out of there. She took a step back, trying to think. She remembered the news a while back: battles in Russia, with snow and biting cold. 'Frostbite,' she said.

Mrs. Sherman raised one eyebrow. 'In July?'

Kristen shook her head. 'I do not know. I really-'

Mrs. Sherman sighed. 'It is the war. No one knows what is going on.' She reached for a bag. 'Two cookies. Two for the price of one.'

'Thanks,' Kristen said. If she ran, she could cut the mail carrier off. She counted pennies out on the counter, reached for the bag, then banged out the screen door.

He was there, crossing the street, still on the boulevard. A miracle.

'Hey,' she called. 'Wait up.'

He did not turn around. He stopped to stuff a paper into the slot at the restaurant, then went next door to the dry cleaner. By the time she caught up with him, she could feel perspiration streaking down her back.

'I need my mail,' she said his sack, not looking at his face.

He would never even give her the movie advertisement. He shook his head. 'I have told you. I must deliver it to your grandmother's house. Cannot be dropping her mail all over the place. She would carry on and-'

'My mail,' Kristen said. 'My mail.'

Inside the sack was her letter, written in her father's handwriting. It would start with 'Sweetheart,' or 'Dear Kristen Billy.'

'My father,' she said in a voice she could hardly hear herself, 'is in the service. The Secret Service.' She stopped, trying to think about how to convince him. 'He told me to be sure to get the mail first. He-'

The mail carrier looked up. 'Jerry went overseas?'

The letter was there, so close she could reach out and take it. She hated the mail carrier.

'You know you're not supposed to ask,' she said. 'You saw the poster in Mrs. Sherman's, 'Loose Lips Sink Ships.' Spies could be walking up and down Cross Bay Boulevard, and my father, who is on a ship right now...'

She could feel her lips trembling even though she did not know if her father was on a ship, or still in New Jersey at Fort Dix, perfectly safe.

The mail carrier shifted the leather strap on his shoulder.

‘Do not cry, Kristen. Let me look. Let me just see...’

She stood there waiting as he went through dozens of envelopes; they seemed like stacks of papers. He kept shaking his head.

Then, at last, he plucked a letter out of the sack.

She breathed in and could feel the tears now.

‘It’s not from your father,’ he said.

Then she could see it too. A small white envelope, filthy, MISS Kristen MOLLAHAN, in pencil.

Lynnnatta. Only Lynnnatta.

‘Listen, Kristen.’ He spoke. ‘There will be a letter tomorrow.

Betcha. You will come right down here to Cross Bay...’

She stared at the sidewalk, at a crack running along with it, a hill of ants bustling. ‘He’s terribly busy,’ she said.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘He’s a great guy.’

Kristen took the letter from him, dug it into her shorts pocket. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, then,’ she said.

‘You can count on it.’

She headed for the fishing dock, looking back once to wave to him. It was a hot walk along Cross Bay Boulevard, but worth it. The fishing boats would be long gone now on a weekday, out since early this morning. She would have the wharf to herself, with only a fisher or two trying for fluke.

She ran the last bit, seeing the weathered dock in front of her, the flag flapping wildly on the pole, and best of all, no one there, not a soul. She took a deep breath, smelling the sea, and kerosene from the boats, and sat on a bench halfway down to read Lynnnatta’s letter. But before she even got to take it out of her pocket, she could see someone on the beach path. No, two people. Her luck.

She shaded her eyes. One was coming on a bicycle, wobbling along, a basket in front, and the other, an effective way in the back of him, seemed to be... She sat up straighter. Yes, it was Noah running down the road after him. He stopped once, and darted into the reeds, as the bicycle rider looked over his shoulder. What was Noah up to, anyway?

The rider slowed as he neared the dock. It was a fisher who would talk and talk, and she would never get one minute's peace when the person she wanted to talk to was Tom.

She slid off the bench, leaning against the side. If he had not seen her, he would have gone all the way to the far end on that bicycle and passed her right by.

He did not, though. She could hear him swinging off the bike, the sound of metal as he rested it against a bench farther down, a splash as he tossed something into the water, and as she peered around the side of the bench, he was on his way again, and Noah was running toward her, waving his arms, shouting.

Kristen gathered herself to her feet, looking first at Tom, whose feet were pounding along the wooden pier, and then at the back of the man on the bicycle. No, it was a boy, a teenager. His head was down, bent over the handlebars, his feet pedaling faster, picking up speed as he disappeared into one of the narrow lanes that snaked through the reeds.

Noah was in front of her now, almost babbling as he pointed down into the pure green water. She took a step toward the edge, looking down too. She saw threads of seagrass floating under the surface, and then the bulging bag, out of sight, sank to the bottom.

‘It is a cot,’ Noah said. ‘A cot.’

She shook her head. ‘It’s too small for a...’ She drew in her breath. A cat. He meant a cat. She was in the water in an instant, rolling over the side instead of diving, not sure of the depth. It was over her head, much deeper than she would have guessed, seven or eight feet. The water bubbled above her, sunlit at first, and then darker. She turned and kicked with her feet, her arms out, reaching, reaching...

And felt the edge of it, the paper bag shredding away in her fingers. Then, a miracle, the kitten was in her hands.

She kicked up with it and broke the surface. It was still, unmoving, a sodden reddish mass, as Tom, hanging half off the pier, took it from her.

She swam around to the steps the fisher used to clean their catch and pulled herself up.

Noah was standing in the middle of the dock now, wrapping the kitten on the edge of his shirt. She moved toward him, her clothes heavy and dripping, her sneakers filled with so much water it was hard to move. 'Don't let her lie still,' she said.

'Keep her moving.'

When she reached him, she grabbed his wrist, shaking his hands, and the cat with them. 'More,' she told him. She dug the cat out of the end of his shirt and kneaded the fur, holding her head down, until at least she coughed and sneezed.

'She is alive,' Noah said. They looked at each other, smiling. How blue his eyes are, she thought, and when he smiled, she liked his face. He looked like another person, like a friend.

But he smiled for only a moment. He took the cat from her, rubbing her fur with his shirt, drying it, and looking around. 'That boy,' he said. 'I saw him put the cat in the bag-' He broke off. 'I have to make her warm,' he said. 'I have to dry her.'

She nodded. Gram would never let her keep a cat, and Mrs. Meyer had never had a pet that she knew about. If only Mrs. Dillon were still there.

Lynnnatta's house, she thought. 'I know,' she told Tom.

'I'll show you.'

It took ten minutes to get back to Lynnnatta's house. They walked slowly, stopping every few minutes to make sure the cat was breathing. She was curled into a ball, still damp, under Tom's shirt.

Kristen led the way around the back. 'I know it looks as if no one lives here,' she said, 'but I have the key, and it isn't trespassing.'

'Trespassing?' He said it after her as if the word had a million s's. 'Funny word.'

She remembered when they were about seven, she and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to steal enough money for a sticky bun each at Mrs. Sherman's. Eddie had caught them, and Lynnnatta, fresh as paint Gram would say, told him what they were doing. He had dug into his pocket for a dime and tossed it toward Kristen in a silvery arc.

She had reached out, and somehow it had landed in her outstretched hands. She remembered Eddie smiling, his teeth over his bottom lip, his eyes crinkling. 'Nice catch.'

It was hot in the bedroom, stifling. She had to get out of there. She went back into the kitchen, feeling the flutter of the kitten's heartbeat.

Lynnnatta's letter. She went over to the counter and angled it, so a shaft of light ran across the envelope from end to end. She ran her finger lightly over the mess of Lynnnatta's handwriting, the return address, DETROIT, MICHIGAN. And even though it had been in the water, Kristen could still see a smear of chocolate on the flap. One more candy bar that would never get to Eddie in Europe.

She sank to the floor with the letter, the kitten in her lap. The envelope opened easily, and the letter came out, damp but still readable.

Dear Kristen.

There is no ocean here at Willow Run, no paint on the houses. They go together in a row, and you can hear people talking and fighting and even going to the bathroom. The houses were just slapped up because thousands of people have come here to make the bombers. My father took me in to see. The factory is a mile long. Everyone just makes one little piece that fits together until the B-24 is finished. My father says they build a bomber every 103 minutes (about 1 hour 43 minutes). I hate the whole thing. How is the attic? Did you find the red candy?

Lynnnatta

Kristen shifted to the floor, peeling her sweaty legs off the linoleum, thinking about Lynnnatta so far away. Lynnnatta without an ocean, without Ridgway. She wondered what Lynnnatta would think about Tom.

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen. 'I was just getting a little worried,' she said.

'I was with Tom,' Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. 'Good. I am glad.'

Kristen leaned over the kitten. 'Noah likes cats,' she said.

'That's something.'

Then he was back, a milk bottle in his hands, enough milk for ten cats the size of this one.

'Now.' Kristen put the cat back on the counter and took the bottle from Tom. She ran her finger under the paper top, popping it up. She tried not to look at the yellow cream just underneath. She would gag if she saw it. She had to dig it out, though.

It might be too thick for the kitten to swallow.

She opened a kitchen drawer, found a spoon, and skimmed off the cream, swallowing hard. She dropped it, spoon, and all, into the sink.

'What are you doing?' He took the spoon and sucked the cream that was left.

She began to gag.

'What is the matter?' He turned the spoon over and ran his tongue over the back.

'Nothing.' She handed him the bottle and let him take the last of the cream. A little stayed on his lower lip, a small yellow fish.

She was going to vomit right now. 'Wipe your mouth,' she told him. She breathed in as he ran the back of his arm over his face, trying to think about chocolate, red LifeSavers, and cookies with the jelly in the middle.

'My sister, Christy, loves cream,' he said.

Kristen looked up, but the cat was standing on the countertop, one paw out, ready to sail into the air.

'Watch out,' she said, and he dived for the kitten and caught her. Then Kristen rummaged around for a small round bowl and poured in some of the milk.

For a moment, the kitten did not seem to notice the bowl in front of her. Then, at last, she turned her head and began to lap at it with her rough little tongue. They watched her until she sat back, and her blue-green eyes began to close, and they could hear her begin to purr.

‘What are we going to do with her?’ Kristen asked. ‘I don’t think Gram...’

Noah was nodding, looking down at the cat. ‘Could we keep her here?’

Kristen had thought of that too. Mrs. Dillon loved cats.

She would hate it that someone had tried to drown a kitten.

‘I have the key,’ she said to herself.

‘If you will lend it to me,’ he said, ‘I will feed the cat myself. You do not have to bother. I will be incredibly careful.’

‘There’s a place in the back,’ she said, ‘under the edge of the steps. The Dillons left their key there sometimes. I guess...’ She felt so disappointed, she could hardly finish. He did not want to be friends. He could have said We can feed her together, or even We can take turns.

Noah patted the cat’s head gently, then took a towel that was still looped over a hook. He made it into a little bed in the corner. There were newspapers there too, and stored them into strips for the cat’s litter, as Kristen itched.

She wanted to say, ‘It’s my cat too.’ She wanted to say, ‘I was the one who saved her.’ She did not, though.

When Noah was finished, she opened the door and, knowing he was watching, went to the back to wedge the key behind the rock.

She started for home without saying goodbye. It was lunchtime anyway. Never mind that Noah did not want to be friends. After lunch, she would take her library book, *The Three Musketeers*, out in the boat with a pillow... the musketeers, who were in France like Tom’s sister. Yes, that is what she would do. Too bad about being friends. She had read for the rest of the afternoon.

The church bells were ringing. Six o’clock on a Wednesday night, at the end of July. Everyone was gathering up pails and wet towels and pulling umbrellas across the beach. She could not wait until the last family dragged itself off the boardwalk toward the Cross-Bay buses. She could not wait until the beach belonged to her.

Gram had packed her supper, Spam doing well with a tomato from Mrs. Colgan's Victory Garden, three or four celery sticks, and a bottle of orange juice.

Kristen sat as close to the water as she could get without getting soaked. The tide was high. The waves washed in, then sucked everything back out, shells, and sand, and bits of seaweed. She thought about listening to Portia Faces Life with Gram this afternoon. Walter was in a rowboat now, waiting to find an American ship to pick him up. Kristen looked out at the water, thinking about Poppy. He would be on a ship one of these days, even today, crossing the Atlantic, passing the Ridgway. She shaded her eyes, watching a lone swimmer surf.

She sat up straight. Who was that?

Tom: He was not far away. He was swimming along in a line next to the beach.

He was not swimming, though. He pulled himself to his feet, then threw himself down to take a couple of strokes before disappearing under the water. A moment later he is up, sputtering, to start the whole thing over. If a lifeguard had been on the beach, he would have been out after Noah in two seconds.

Kristen stood up. Noah was trying to teach himself how to swim.

He was not paying one bit of attention to the water. He was not trying to be part of it, to float along with it. He was fighting it, arms slapping, head sticking up like a tennis ball.

She would not be able to eat her Spam in peace; she would have to watch him every minute.

Noah was going to kill himself.

Yes, there it was, a giant wave. She could see it swelling, way out but moving toward him, picking up speed.

She looked toward Tom. Under. Tennis ball head shooting up. An arm out over his head, fingers wide apart.

She stood up, trying to see how much time he had. She cupped her hands over her mouth, shouting. He could not hear her, could not see her.

She took a step toward him. Then she was running, throwing herself into the icy coldness, slicing into the water, swimming diagonally.

Of course, she was too late. The wave curled up high, and she was in the wrong position, just where it arched. It smashed into her, dragging her down, scraping her along the sand. She could not get her breath. The water was in her mouth, her throat, her nose.

And then she was out of it, coughing up water, arms and legs scratched, lying on foamy sand.

The last time she had done that she was six years old. Poppy had caught her up in his arms and carried her back to the blanket. He had fed her tiny squares of egg salad crunchy with celery.

She looked up to see her feet. Skinny Noah feet. Bony Noah's legs with black-and-blue marks and grains of sand.

She had forgotten all about him.

She leaned on her hands to push herself up, then scrambled to her feet.

Noah reached out. 'I thought you were such a good swimmer,' he said.

As soon as she stopped coughing, she was going to drown him herself. She was going to take him by his skinny neck and throw him right back.

She went back to the blanket and sat on the edge, wiping her face with her hands. Her nose and throat burned. She remembered the bottle of orange juice and ached for it. She knew he had followed her to the blanket, but she did not look up.

She wanted to say she could swim better than anyone she knew. Hadn't she saved the cat? But she wanted to say more, that the ocean belonged to her, that all winter at home in St. Paul's she thought about it moving and rolling and waiting for her to come back.

'How is the cat?' she said, knowing very well how the cat was. She had spied on Noah going in and out of use for the last few days. She had let herself in when he was gone. The cat had fluffed up, soft orange and white. He kept her bed and litter box clean, and the kitchen too.

‘The cat is good,’ he said. He was sitting on the other end of the blanket now, dripping. She did not know how he had been there. He pointed. ‘Do you see?’

The end of the jetty, a gray triangular rock. She nodded.

‘Yes.’

‘If you drew a line straight out, all the way...’

‘Europe,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Europe.’

‘Want some juice?’ she asked, not looking at him.

He shook his head.

She took a deep swallow of the juice, feeling it soothe her throat, watching a curl of smoke out on the horizon.

‘A ship,’ Noah said, ‘going to Europe.’

‘No.’ She shaded her eyes. ‘It is a cutter. Coast Guard, patrolling.’ It felt good to let him know she knew something, knew more than he did.

She took another sip from the bottle.

‘My aunt said you can see the ships from here.’

‘They form a convoy way out,’ she said and pointed. ‘But some of them come from Brooklyn. The destroyers, the carriers, sometimes the tankers. You can see them at night if you watch long enough.’

‘Going to Europe,’ Noah said.

She nodded. ‘Going to win the war for us, going to blast the Nazis right out of the water.’

‘And your father is going...’

Later, when she thought about it, she could not imagine saying what she had, it was just that she had been thinking of Portia Faces Life, and Poppy crossing out there in front of her, and Noah saying, ‘I thought you were such a good swimmer.’

‘I’m going too,’ was what she said. ‘At night. I am going to row right out and swim the last bit. I will have a rubber bag with dry clothes.’ It sounded wonderful, and she could see he was listening. He was not thinking of her as a silly kid, wearing Gertz lipstick, spying around. ‘I’m going to take a ship to my father, no one will stop to take me back to Brooklyn, there’s a war on, you know...’ Talking and talking, making up lies as she went along, and Tom, leaning forward...

‘You could do that?’ he asked.

‘Of course.’ She stared at the cutter angling its way west toward Brooklyn until all she could see was a curl of smoke on the horizon. And then, just for a moment, it almost seemed possible. She could see herself reaching the troopship, climbing aboard, and sailing to Europe to find Poppy.

‘And you can see those ships at night?’ He took a breath. ‘Would you take me out to see them? Would you take me out tonight?’

She put the empty bottle back in her bag and started to roll up her towel. ‘All right,’ she said, not looking at him.

He stood up. ‘I am going to the house. I will feed my cat.

You will come to my porch at eleven?’

He started across the sand, not waiting for an answer.

She sat there a minute longer, her heart pounding, thinking that this was truly the worst lie she had ever told.

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan’s Victory Garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother’s stars passed in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The Old Man framed this picture and hung it over the bed in my French Blue room in our winter house in Hancock. The mirror on the opposite wall reflects the picture so it is the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning ... that and my tree figure from Gram.

The tree figure wears the crystal beads Izzy gave me.

‘They’re too small for you now, Kristen,’ Izzy said as she looped them carefully over the sea-grass head. ‘They’re from my sixth birthday. But I always wanted my oldest daughter to have them.’

I tried to match the picture to the Wone in my backpack, but I could not do it exactly. First, there is a flag in the background of this one because it is Memorial Day, the day we open the house in Laurel Highlands for the summer each year. It is early in the morning, and we are standing on the porch steps with the sun sending beams of light across the river in front of us.

But there are five of us in the picture instead of four. The Old Man, looking a little grim: He’s just discovered that Green is left his bedroom window open, so the snow drifted in all winter, ruining the wall, and buckling parts of the wood floor.

Green tries to look serious, but you can see the laughter in his eyes. ‘Holly will paint it up,’ he said, needling the Old Man. ‘She’ll paint it green. That is her favorite color.’

They still argue, sometimes so loudly I put my hands over my ears. When they see me, they smile? ‘It’s all her fault,’ Green says, and the Old Man leans over to pat my shoulder.

In the picture, Izzy stands in the center, a little taller than the Old Man. She is wearing a loose shirt in that blue I love. ‘Are you happy?’ she asked me as I sketched us all later that day. ‘Be happy, Kristen, because I am. I have never been happier.’

I did not answer. Instead, I drew smiles on both our faces. I am the fourth one in the picture smiling just a bit. I know I am thinking of Gram, thinking of running here with her a year and a half ago. If I had not done that, I would not have had this picture, I would not have had any of it. I would still be running.

Every month we go to Long Island to see her in her kitchen with Henry, and the pelican, and the tree figures she still carves, while Beatrice patters around fixing tea for all of us.

Gram does not remember exactly who I am anymore. She loves me, though, I know that, and always reaches up to touch my cheek. Sometimes I wear her brown hat with a veil, and then I see the recognition in her eyes. ‘Kristen,’ she says. ‘You saved my life.’ She does not know why, but still, she says it, and I always tell her it was the other way around.

And Henry? Ancient, but still feisty. ‘That cat’s as tough as you are,’ Green says to me.

Henry looks at me, and it is as if he wins before he closes both eyes above a wide yawn. We speak the same language, that cat and me.

I have a new last name now. It is Regan. I love the sound of it. I have not forgotten Kristen Copses, who wanted and wished, fresh as paint, a mountain of trouble, so I sign my drawings using the three names. They all belong to me. Emmy and the hot cocoa woman both like the idea of that. They show up regularly to say hello, nodding and smiling as if they were the ones who changed my whole life. I do not say anything. I know they are relieved to have me out of their hands and settled. And I have to say I cannot blame them for that. I have to say, too, that I even smile back at them occasionally.

But the picture, and why it does not match the first one, the W picture: It is because I am holding my sister, Christina, six weeks old, in my arms.

She looks quiet in the picture, contented, sucking on her thumb. But she is not always like that. And when she cries, we run to her from wherever we are. We stand over her bassinet smiling at her, cooing. And Izzy always puts her arms around me. 'You brought us luck,' she says.

So, there are five of us now: a mother, a father, a brother, and two sisters.

A family.

Kristen - bedroom was at the top of the stairs, the only one on the second floor. 'The top of the house,' Gram always told her, 'The top of the world.'

Kristen sank back on her heels to look around at the blue walls and ceiling, and the gold stars passed on here and there. Then she stretched up again, working with Poppy's paint scraper, to peel off a star that was beyond her reach.

She was hot and sticky, the temperature at least ninety degrees, and Gram, who did not have one bit of patience, was calling from the kitchen for the tenth time.

'Your father will be home in just a few minutes, and the table isn't set.'

As if Kristen did not know it was dinnertime. Even Mrs. Harry halfway down 17th Street would be able to smell that cabbage

cooking. 'I thought you wanted me to finish packing,' Kristen called back as loudly as she could, to drown out the radio in the kitchen.

She could hardly breathe in that bedroom, Kristen thought, glancing around again; she could hardly walk. Things were pulled out all over the floor, waiting to be stuffed into her suitcase: books, papers with stories she had written, bathing suits, and heaps of clothes Gram had put on the bed.

She had even found an old silver mirror of her mother's she had hidden away in the back of the closet last winter. She was going to put it carefully on top of the suitcase in a nest of pajamas. It would be a miracle if she ever got that far, though, if everything got itself sorted out, and packed, and if they made it to the house in Ridgway before her birthday on Monday.

'Ridgway.' She said it aloud, loving the sound of it on her tongue. Ridgway and the ocean were waiting for her. The summer without homework... to author stories for herself and not Sister Jillen. The summer without a piano to practice every afternoon.

Days and days to sneak into the movies with her best friend, Lynnnatta.

Gram was at the bottom of the stairs now, the six o'clock news blaring from the radio behind her. War news, about the end of the war. The invasion of France by the Allies a couple of weeks ago. That was all nobody talked about. No, not quite. Sister Jillen was much more interested in whether the class had rosaries and clean handkerchiefs in their pockets than in who was going to win the war.

Too bad about Sister Jillen. Kristen would be out of St. Paul's in four days, and Sister Jillen would still be stuck there in St.

Pascal's thinking about everyone's clean handkerchiefs.

'Kristen? You are not packed yet?' Gram called. 'I thought you had finished an hour ago. And remember we do not have that much room in the car.'

'Almost finished,' Kristen said, and 'almost started,' under her breath. And there, with another slide of the paint scraper, the star came bizarre in one piece, drifting into her outstretched palm. It was perfect, the points still as sharp as when they were new. The star she had scraped off last year had torn a little, and...

Kristen turned it over. A trace of glue was still on the back. She put her mouth against it, a kiss. Her mother had been the last one to

touch that spot when she had passed it up to her years ago. She had still been Baby Elizabeth then... no one had called her Kristen yet, and her mother had been alive...' playing the piano with you on her lap,' Poppy had told her once, 'dancing in the living room with you on her shoulder.' Kristen wished she could remember it.

She could hear her father coming now, whistling along 17th Street, just off the Q3A bus, calling hello to Mrs. Bruns. Gram heard him too. 'Dinner this minute, Kristen. 'She said, slumping back toward the kitchen.

Kristen stood up and put the star between two pages of her book, Evangeline. By this time, Poppy was in the kitchen; she could hear him talking to Gram. Kristen raced down for a hug before Gram started to talk and talk, and no one else could get a word edgewise.

Poppy was standing at the sink, his straw hat still on but pushed back, drinking a glass of water from the tin measuring cup. Kristen loved to drink out of that too. It always made the water taste icy, even on the hottest day.

Her father turned. 'Kristen Billy,' he said, smiling at her.

'All packed? Ready for Ridgway?'

'Ready,' she said.

Gram rolled her eyes in the back of Poppy, but Kristen did not even blink. She slid some plates around the table, the forks, and the knives, while Poppy tossed his hat over the hook on the door and washed his hands.

'I have a surprise,' he said over his shoulder. 'You won't believe-'

'Mr. Egan is a Nazi spy,' Kristen said at the same minute.

Poppy stopped listening to what she was saying. He always did that. It was one of his nicest ways. He was biting his lip, though, as if he would laugh.

Gram speared the boiled beef out of the pot and dripped it across the counter to the cutting board. 'Mr. Egan is not a spy,' she said. 'I have told you that about fourteen times. Mr. Egan is-'

'A spy,' Kristen said, her eyes narrowed at Gram.

‘Well,’ said Poppy, ‘I’ll have to keep my eye on him while you and Gram are in Ridgway.’

‘You’ll be with us on some weekends,’ Kristen said. ‘He could-’

‘And what do you think poor Noah Egan is doing?’ Gram asked, slicing it into the meat.

‘He’s building something in his garage,’ Kristen said.

‘Certainly, sounds suspicious,’ said Poppy, grinning.

‘It could be anything,’ Kristen said. ‘When he saw me looking in the window, he said I was into everyone’s business.’

‘True,’ said Gram.

‘You have to be alert,’ Poppy said.

Kristen slid into her seat, smiling. She knew he was teasing.

‘You said you had a surprise,’ she reminded him.

‘The piano,’ said Poppy.

Kristen took a deep breath. ‘I’ll miss it this summer.’ She crossed her fingers.

Gram turned to look at her quickly over her shoulder.

‘I love music.’ Kristen stared right back. Music, yes, she thought, but not the piano. The damn piano, she called it deep inside her head. If Gram ever thought she even knew that word, she would be in trouble for a month.

‘Like your mother.’ Poppy pulled a chair out across from her. ‘Well, you won’t have to be without the piano this summer.’ Kristen looked down at the damp beef Gram was putting on her plate, the pale cabbage, the boiled potatoes with a sprig of parsley from the Victory Garden in the back. ‘But how...’

Poppy was nodding. ‘Not only the piano but an extra suitcase full of stuff if you like. I have hired a truck-’

‘A truck?’ Gram said. ‘What will that cost?’

Poppy waved his hand around. 'Kristen has a birthday coming up,' he said. 'I just couldn't resist.'

Kristen looked down at her plate, three piles of stuff, cabbage, beef, and potatoes. She knew Poppy was waiting for her to say something. He was waiting for her to throw her arms around him and tell him how wonderful it was. She could hardly talk, though. She picked up her knife and cut her beef into a bunch of little pieces. 'Amazing,' she said at last.

'Yes, it is,' said Gram.

It was Friday afternoon. The school was over; goodbye, St. Pascal's, goodbye, Sister Jillen, goodbye, report card. Kristen had put the report card in Gram's hand at the front door, walked right past her and up to her bedroom. Forty things were left to jam into a cardboard box.

Kristen put the first one in, a bottle of Kristen -of-the-valley perfume used up except for a little darkish stuff at the bottom. It smelled delicious, though. She waited to put the next thing in; she could hear Gram's footsteps on the stairs. She kept her back stiff, staring down at the bottle. She knew what was coming. 'D in music,' Gram would say. 'How could you possibly...' And she would have spotted that effort mark, B-, too. She would say the whole thing was a disgrace.

Kristen took a breath. Someone was knocking at the front door, banging on the door. She could hear Gram's footsteps stop, could picture her turning...

Kristen rushed to the window. Downstairs was the truck, gray, rusty: MCHUGH'S-WE'LL TREAT YOUR FURNITURE LIKE OUR OWN. Their furniture must be a mess, Kristen thought. And then, worse, what would everyone in Ridgway think when they saw the Mollahans arriving for the summer in a truck that was falling apart, an upright piano lashed to the back with rope, and Kristen and Gram sitting squashed in the front seat?

Kristen closed her eyes. Horrible.

At least Gram had forgotten about the report card. Kristen went downstairs to watch the two white-haired men in the living room. They were talking to Gram, joking a little, one of them singing, 'They are either too young or too old,' while the other was telling Gram that both their sons were in the service and that they were keeping the business going for the duration of the war.

Gram was frowning, watching them hoist up the piano with a bowl of flowers still on top. Kristen could see they would be stuck at the door; the piano would not go through in a million years. Alleluia. And better yet, her report card was on the bottom step of the stairs. Gram was not paying attention to it. Kristen knew she was worried about the piano scratching the wall as the men worked on shoving it through the door.

Kristen reached down for the report card, backed up the stairs. She could see herself in the truck, Gram suddenly saying, 'I never did look at your report card, Kristen. Do you know where...'

Perfect. Kristen would not say a word. Gram had lost the thing herself. Not Kristen's fault, certainly not.

Up in her bedroom, she looked around. Her book, Evangeline, was still in the dresser. Kristen moved the star to the front page and put the blue report card in the back as far away from the star as possible. Her mother would never have cared for report cards.

And ten minutes later, finally, Kristen was packed. She picked up the last carton, listening to the perfume bottle clinking into her lipstick samples from Gertz Department Store in Jamaica, FREE TAKE ONE. Kristen had taken a bunch; you never knew when stuff like that would come in handy.

She started down the stairs with the carton, and Evangeline tucked carefully under her arm. At the other end of the hall was the wrenching sound of wood splitting, the molding hanging loose. Still, in the living room, Gram made an angry sound, but one of the men was telling her not to worry, molding was nothing, they could fix it up in a moment. 'Tell Mr. Mollahan we'll come back next week and...'

The piano. They had gotten through it. It stood there in the hall, huge, with round glass stains on the top and two of the keys missing the ivory. And then the men lifted it again and started the door. Kristen followed them, circling Gram still powdering her nose in the hall mirror.

The piano was in the truck now, with one of the men looping great pieces of rope around it, telling the other one, 'I'll stay back here, just to make sure the thing doesn't roll out.' He winked at Kristen. thinking it was a great joke.

Some jokes. Gram came out the door wearing her blue summer hat with the cherries. She climbed up into the passenger seat, leaving a spot next to the window for Kristen. 'We're off,' she told Kristen. 'At last. I never thought we would make it this year.'

Gram was smiling; she loved Ridgway too. Kristen closed her eyes as the truck started. She did not want to look at the neighbors, who were waving at them and the piano and the rusty truck, thinking they were crazy.

But then they turned the corner, heading for the Belt Parkway, heading for Cross Bay Boulevard, and the bridge, and Kristen could feel the excitement of it, the ocean waiting, the sound of it, the role of it, and it was hers for the whole summer.

She did not open her eyes when Gram began to look at the report card. She could feel the vibration of the motor, and hear the man in front singing, 'They're either too young or too old,' and Gram humming along. And the next thing she heard was the sound of the tires hitting the planks of the bridge. They were there.

Ridgway...

Films of Kristen Deniel

I have this drawing folded carefully in my backpack. We are sitting at the table on the porch, the river in front of us, summer rain drilling the roof above us, soaking us all that last Saturday, muddying the road, greening the grass, puckering the river.

In the picture Izzy is backing out of the screen door, balancing the cake plate in her hands. The cake was vanilla, and Izzy had gathered blue forget-me-nots to circle it.

I used the sharpest pencil (Strawberry Pink) to write the words on top of the cake: WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, HOLLY.

Izzy frowned. 'I wanted to get your whole name in, but there wasn't enough room.'

The Old Man's eyes sparkled. A moment before I framed the picture in my mind, he patted my shoulder. 'Kristen Copses, with us forever.'

Greens sat on the other side. I had drawn pages of animal tracks for him, raccoon and deer, rabbit, and possum ... and birds, even a loon that had come up out of the water to sun itself on a rock.

'I'll probably keep them forever, Sister Loon,' he said, full of himself. 'Get it?' He pointed to the loon tracks on the side of the page, nudging me under the table like a six-year-old, rattling the glasses, the cake plates.

‘Green’s, please.’ The Old Man had not been happy with him all week. Nothing gigantic; little stuff. Greens had left the shed door open, so a raccoon had nested inside ... the one whose toes were marching all over green’s paper. Greens had left the house door open, so a bat had flown around the living room Wednesday night. He had lost the Old Man’s fishing knife, and one of the reels was sunk under the water somewhere downstream.

‘Why don’t you just try with him?’ I had asked Green’s the day before as we rowed around looking for it.

I could see the anger in his eyes. ‘You’re good enough for both of us,’ he had said. ‘That’s what Pop would say.’

I leaned forward. ‘Is it me?’ I asked. ‘My fault?’

He laughed then. ‘Don’t be silly.’

Still, I was not sure. I opened my mouth to tell him about me, a mountain of trouble, but before I could, he tapped my arm. ‘Hey.’ His eyes were earnest behind his glasses. ‘You don’t have to look like that.’ He broke off a piece of holly and handed it to me. ‘Peace, Kristen. It is just like you. Prickly, but not bad to look at.’

I had tried to hide my smile.

Now Izzy has put the cake in the center of the table. ‘Should we have candles?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’ Green grinned at me. ‘The works.’

‘Why not?’ I leaned back. I was full of myself too, thinking about calling the Old Man Pop, and Izzy Mom.

Izzy went inside to rummage through the table drawers for the candles, and Green turned to me, saying we might walk up the mountain after supper.

The Old Man looked at him sharply. ‘In the rain?’

‘Don’t worry.’ I knew I could make the Old Man smile.

‘We’re tougher than the rain.’

‘I’m not talking about going all the way to the top,’

Greens said.

We ate the cake then, the icing melting on my tongue, and I was feeling guilty because I was the one who wanted to go up on the mountaintop.

The end of the old Kristen. Hey, world, here comes the new one.

And I wanted to go alone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The next afternoon I went from room to room, taking my time, looking at everything. Everything. I did not go into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom. That was their private place.

Filmstrips filled the guest room wall, and I spent a long time looking at each one. I waited to get to the end to see if one of me was still there.

First, there was a young Izzy in a two-piece bathing suit, then the Old Man sawing down a dead tree, sawdust coloring his beard. There were several of Green's: one without his front teeth, in a bunny costume, one sitting on the hood of the truck, and one with the fishnet in his hand, his head thrown back, laughing.

And the one of me was still there. I was sharpening a pencil, with pale pink shavings falling in a pile on my drawing paper. I ran my finger over it: still there, in the row with the others, belonging to them.

Green's room was next, a mess of a room. Socks on the floor, a jumble of string, a couple of keys, and a photo on the dresser. A photo I could not even make out, blurs of greens and blues, and something in the center that might have been the boat.

Behind me, Gram called, 'I found boots. I am going to wear them.'

'It's too cold to go out,' I called back. 'You'll freeze.' But the outside door slammed, and I went to the window. 'Gram?' I put my hand on the glass; chilly air drifted in around the panes.

Gram was wearing Izzy's wading boots, which went up to her thighs. She twirled in the snow, arms out, fingers spread. It made me dizzy to watch her. After a moment she tipped over, but it was an easy fall, making me think of snow angels. Her scarf blew across the smooth whiteness, a scrap of color.

She was up again, zigzagging, and I thought about going after her as she disappeared in the back of the line of evergreens. I hurried a little, grabbing my jacket. The thermometer outside the kitchen window read five degrees, and next to the window, on the wall, the calendar was still in August.

(August.)

I went out the back door, calling to her. And then in that cold stillness, I could hear her singing. ‘Over the river...’

I went after her, my feet heavy, twirling as I passed the circle she had made, singing back, ‘...and through the Deniel...’

She leaned against a small tree, staring at the thin strip of dark water that ran between the chunks of ice. ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ I spoke.

‘I love to walk in the snow.’ She was shivering again, looking up at me, suddenly bewildered. ‘But why aren’t we home? And what happened to Beatrice?’

I led her back into the house, into that warm room with the bright blue rugs and the huge couch. I found a robe of Izzy’s and wrapped it around her. We sat by the fireplace watching the shadows dance over the walls until it grew dark outside, and we slept.

In the morning, points of light danced over my eyes. I raised my hand to my face; the sun was melting tiny swirls of ice on the window.

Somewhere outside was a faint buzzing sound. It was not close-close-anything to worry about-but what was it? Someone using a saw deep in the Copses. A snow-mobile? The sound gradually died away, and I stood up slowly, thinking about breakfast. There were choices, thanks to Izzy: cans of pineapple juice, blackberry jam, vegetables shiny inside their glass jars, rows of Dinty Moore stew.

Izzy’s treasures, not mine.

I would pay her back someday, I told myself, pay back all of it.

Lighten up, Green is said in my head. I had to smile. That is really what he would have said.

I unclenched my hands and took another look outside. Footprints crisscrossed the snow. Our footprints. I thought about them uneasily, glancing up at the sky, wishing for more snow to hide them.

I put water on to boil and popped a piece of Gram's bread into the toaster. A mouse lived somewhere in the house. Poor mouse. He would have to leave now that Henry was here. I wiped away the mice leaving with a brush, then sat at the table in front of the window, with Gram's wood pieces on one side and my food lined up in front of me.

After I ate, I looked at the tree figure Gram was doing of me: a long piece of wood, spaces drilled in the sides where the arms would be, a face beginning to take shape, a mouth began, a small, pointed nose, and a tiny cut on the forehead.

I put my hand up to my forehead, feeling that indentation. And then Gram was there, yawning, her hair a whoosh around her head. She pattered over to the back window. 'Sun today,' she said, holding her hands out as if to warm them against the glass. 'And a branch that is blown onto the step. Holly, I think.'

I took the last bit of toast crust and crunched it into my mouth.

'The sun on the ocean makes a path sometimes.' Gram reached for a chocolate bar. 'You think you can walk on it, walk clear across the ocean to...'

She stopped and I tried to help her. 'To England? To France?'

'To where I belong.' She sat at the table and began to work. As I put toast and hot tea in front of her, she glanced around.

'What?' I asked.

'I'm wondering about Beatrice,' she said and smiled.

'And sandpaper. Your face needs smoothing.'

There might be sandpaper in the shed. I would get it. I did not have to look at the truck again; I would pretend it was not there. I opened the back door to a blast of cold air-'So cold your teeth hurt,' the Old Man had said- and saw the holly branch, thick with bright red berries, that had blown across the steps.

Green's holding a sprig of holly out to me: 'Peace, Holly.'

‘I’ll get my jacket,’ I told Gram. I shrugged into it, pulled on my gloves, and went outside for the sandpaper. The cold went through me, the smell of it sharp and clean.

The hot cocoa woman was far away, looking for me. She would not have a clue.

On the way back, I bent down and picked up the holly to bring into the house. I gave Gram the squares of sandpaper, then put the branch in one of Izzy’s vases in front of the big window, thinking about Christmas. Ten more days.

Gram and I would have our own. I had cut boughs of pine, and we had packs of popcorn to make. It would be like Christmas in a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I was happier than I had been anywhere, except...

...I did not belong in that house in Laurel Highlands, not anymore. I wondered what Christmas was like in the Old Man’s winter house, what it would be like this year.

I snipped off that thought before I finished it. Wasn’t it enough that I was here in Laurel Highlands, with holly in the window?

If only I could stay forever.

Something else the Old Man had told me about: fishing in the winter. The fish went deep, but if you caught one, eating was an experience.

An experience. The Old Man used words like that.

Fish for dinner, dotted with butter ... No butter. Ah, fish smothered in tomato sauce, and string beans jarred last summer.

A real meal, the way normal people ate. Better than normal.

‘I know you like fish,’ I said to Gram.

‘Goldfish. I had one in a bowl; I think.’ She glanced at Henry, who slept in the middle of one of the Old Man’s blue rugs.

‘I don’t trust Henry, though.’

‘To eat, I mean, for us.’

She looked across at me, shocked. 'I'd never eaten a goldfish.'

I could feel the laughter bubble up. 'Pickerel,' I said. 'Bass.'

I am not sure what is around this time of the year.'

'Ah, yes.' She picked up her knife to shave curly bits off the wooden feet.

The Old Man's fishing equipment was hanging on the far wall. Did I want to go out into that icy world? Of course, I did. In Green's bedroom, I gathered things to keep warm: his old green sweater for a scarf around my neck, and an extra pair of socks. I found a towel in the hall closet to wrap around my head like a turban, and one of Izzy's large sweaters to put over the whole thing.

I was ready with the pole in my hand. Gram laughed at the sight of me as I passed her.

'The yeti,' I said, and then I was outside, trying to decide. I could fish from the bank or the Old Man's bridge. The bank was closed, so I walked along the tree line and down to a spot in front of the house. I swung the pole, lured on the line, over the ice into the narrow stream of water. I did not know how long I stood there fishing, but after a while I leaned back against a bare maple tree, watching movement on the other side of the river, just the quickest bit of color. A squirrel? A raccoon? But then I saw it was something larger, a deer.

It took one more moment to realize that a person, a fisher, was standing there, back among the trees. And if I had seen him, he might have been able to see me.

The pole slid out of my hands as I lurched backward toward the holly bushes. Another quick step and green's sweater pulled away on a branch. I looked back to see the pole on the snowy bank. It had sunk into the snow so that it could not be seen. There was just a narrow indentation in the snow; it might have been only a branch if anyone spotted it.

My mouth was dry. I looked across the river again. There was no movement on the other side: a scoop of snow slid off one of the Laurel Highlands; a blue jay teetered on another.

I turned and ran the last few steps toward the house and up onto the porch. I reached for the door, closed, and locked it in the back of me, leaned against it inside, taking deep breaths.

‘What is it?’ Gram asked.

I shook my head. ‘Another fisher. Do not worry.’
Christmas was coming. It was someone cutting down a tree or poaching
in the Old Man’s Copses.

All right. It was all right.

He had not seen me, and we were safe.

Gram put on her scarf and her coat and wandered outside,
‘To breathe for a moment,’ she told me.

I stayed near the window, watching. But there was not
anyone there, no one at all.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I know what people mean when they say they feel as if
they are floating. That is the way I felt as if my feet were not attached
to the ground as if they were bouncing off the floor, touching lightly,
and bouncing again. And inside me, it was as if bubbles were drifting,
bumping gently into each other.

I was happy. No, that does not even describe it. I was ...
jubilant, ecstatic.

I drew it using all the pencils-yellow and oranges, pinks,
and blues. I drew purple shoes on my feet and wings on my shoulders.
My eyes were closed, the way you see films of angels sometimes with
their eyelashes down on their cheeks.

So, does it make sense that I was not thinking? That all
that floating, and all those bubbles made me think I could do anything?

And so that last week, all I thought about was going to the
top of the Old Man’s Mountain and shouting down to the entire world. I
even knew what I was going to say: Here I am, Kristen Copses, who
did not deserve to be in a family ... tough Kristen Copses, running-
away Kristen Copses. Look at me. I climbed the mountain. Now I
belong.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Half-awake one morning; I heard a train. I looked up at the
window to see a solid square of white: a storm, with pin dots of flakes
covering everything. What I had heard was the roar of the wind coming
down the valley.

I got out of bed and went downstairs to see what was happening outside the big window. The holly bushes on one side of the house were just a blur; the narrow sliver of a river and its snowy bank had disappeared into a mist of gray.

A little cold, I hugged myself, watching that world. It was like a plastic globe in one of the houses I had been in. When I shook it, snow fell, covering a bright green Christmas tree in its center. 'Don't touch that, Kristen. Put it down.'

21

Films of Kristen Deniel

It was late when we reached the exit sign for Laurel Highlands. The gas station light was out, and there was only a tiny light at the back of the grocery store. 'We're almost there,' I told Gram, 'Just the last four miles.'

'Already?' She sounded delighted. She zoomed off the ramp, stopping on the shoulder, and in a moment, she was asleep, her head against the steering wheel. Henry climbed off my lap, where he had been for the past hour, and slid onto hers, his whiskers twitching as he closed his eyes.

I leaned over and turned the key to stop the motor. Suddenly I was wide awake and reaching for the door handle. I gave Henry a pat, then I got out of the car.

At first, it was hard to see, but little by little silhouettes appeared against the sky: the curve of a tree trunk, the dark square of the grocery store ahead, and above us, the Old Man's Mountain, raising its head to the sky. It was a shock to see it there.

Beatrice would have said it was a drawing coming to life. I pictured her in a place with huge cacti, saguaro, I thought they were called. I remembered she had said she would call every Sunday. What would she think when the phone rang and rang?

I shook myself. What would happen if I tried to call her again?

She had come home, her dream over.

I was not going to do that. Back in the car, I nudged Gram awake. 'Just drive this last bit,' I said, 'and then you can sleep.'

We drove along the narrow road, with no other lights now except for a few houses far up in the hills, and I kept talking to keep her awake. 'We'll see the river. It is not as big as your ocean...'

'Your river.' Gram's head bobbed.

'Keep watching,' I told her. 'We do not want to go off the road. The river would be cold for a swim.'

I saw her smile. 'Henry doesn't have his bathing suit.'

And there was the bridge. I had stood on that bridge watching the pickerel, the catfish, the muskrat building his nest of sticks against its base.

The Old Man's bridge.

'We'll have a fire in the fireplace,' I said, 'and turn the heat up high.' I could see the Old Man flipping the switch in the early mornings when the dew was still on the grass and the house was still cold.

We thumped across the bridge over the river, and the house was in front of us, waiting. 'Gram, this is the place.' My voice was flat. I might have been telling her it was a snowy day, or the sun might come out tomorrow, but inside, my heart was thumping.

We had just this winter, I knew that, and spring.

By summer we would have to find somewhere else.

That was months. That was forever.

I closed my eyes, remembering the last morning I had been there. I had gone out the screen door toward the car, brushing my fingers along the holly bushes, feeling the sharp edges of the leaves against my thumb.

I had walked as far as the town, a long way in the early morning heat, and sat on the bench with my things on my lap, waiting for the Shortline bus, and looking down, I realized I had left the drawing box. That was the worst moment, knowing I would never see that box again. Geranium Red, Dove Gray, French Blue. 'We're home, Gram,' I said.

'Hard to see,' she said.

‘Just get used to the darkness,’ I told her. ‘In a minute you’ll see it all.’

She took everything in then, and I with her: the house with the sloping roof, the evergreens leaning over it, the dark shadow that was the woodpile on the front porch. The rocking chairs were in the shed, I knew that, but I could picture them there, rocking gently.

Gram took a deep breath.

‘I knew you’d like it,’ I said, watching Henry in the rearview mirror. He stood on the back of the headrest now, his claws in my shoulder, his nose twitching, his whiskers quivering, sizing up the place. ‘And you too, Henry.’

‘But is it all right?’ Gram asked, frowning. ‘Are you sure we can do this?’

‘We can.’ I brushed away thoughts of being caught, of what the Old Man might think of me if he ever found out. What did he think of me anyway? Please do not mind this thing I am doing, I begged him in my head.

A red cardinal swooped down to perch on a holly branch that bent itself into the snow, snow marked by threadlike bird prints and deep hollows from the deer. The tracks hugged the edge of the clearing, close to the evergreens, and one path, from a rabbit, led to the river.

I wondered if Green’s had ever seen the house in the winter. He would love it.

I chewed my knuckle. A lace curtain of snow blew across the porch. It was bitterly cold with the engine turned off. I had to get Gram into the house. Her shoes had heels, with open toes and diamond-shaped cutouts on the sides. Why hadn’t I thought of her shoes?

Henry scratched his claws along the car window, wanting to get out. I gave his ear a tweak, opened the door, and watched his belly through the snow away from the car.

‘I’m sorry, Gram,’ I said, still looking down at her feet. They would be soaked. ‘You’ll have to walk through this to get to the house.’

‘An adventure,’ Gram said, grabbing the handle.

I slipped her scarf up around her head, the orange a bright spot in the darkness, and buttoned the top button of her coat.

‘All right,’ I said.

Outside we skirted the trees, and she stopped to look up.

‘A million stars,’ she said, pointing. ‘There’s the Dipper and Orion. Beatrice would love it.’ Then I held her by the waist as we went up the back steps.

Her face was a little disapproving as I kicked my sneaker off and, hopping, smashed into the small kitchen window. And then we were inside, Henry skittering around us.

I leaned back against the wall, reaching for the light, hoping they had not turned off the electricity. Suddenly the kitchen sprang to life. The refrigerator began to hum, and beyond it, I could see the huge living room with the long table at one end and dark blue rugs scattered across the wood floor. The Old Man was proud of that floor; he always talked about putting it in with Izzy, about matching the pieces of wood exactly, holding up his hands as if Green’s and I could see them clutching a hammer and saw.

Gram shivered, her lips colorless, and my hands felt numb. I flipped the switch for heat and heard the furnace startup. At the fireplace chunks of wood and paper were piled in a bin. I knelt there, crumpling the yellowed newspapers to tuck in between some logs, and read last summer’s news as I struck a match against the stones of the hearth: Someone had caught a huge trout near Byron’s Falls; a sidewalk sale was planned for Main Street; there were canoes for rent in Shadyside.

I was here last summer; all of that had been happening. I kept talking to Gram, telling her that this place had been mine only for a month or two, but now it was ours. And she sank on the couch, nodding, watching the fire.

Is it still mine? I asked the Old Man. Mine for just this winter.

A thin flame curled up from somewhere underneath the logs and Gram clapped her hands. ‘Fire!’

The Old Man’s wooden floor shone with a rosy gleam, and my eyes began to close as my fingers warmed, but I could not fall asleep yet.

I settled Gram on the couch and found an old towel to dry her feet. They were mottled from the cold. ‘Skinny as a bird,’ I told her as I rubbed them. She put her head back, asleep again.

In the kitchen, I used the same towel to close the opening in the missing windowpane. While we were here, I would figure out how to replace that. There was glass in the shed; I had seen the Old Man measuring and cutting.

I climbed the stairs to the little green room that had been mine. Everything was just the same. The dresser mirror reflected my old sneakers, just visible under the edge of the bumpy white bedspread; the curtains, pink with roses, looped back; and the drawing box on the dresser.

The drawing box...

I ran my fingers over that half-opened box, the pencils spilling out: French Blue, Geranium Red. It was hard to swallow. I touched all the pencils, the pad of paper, the sharpener.

Henry and I made four or five trips back to the car for things I had taken from Gram's house. Steam came from my mouth in small white puffs and from the chimney in larger ones. But the cold did not bother Henry. He pranced through the snow, chasing twigs and a few crumpled leaves as if he were a kitten. He must have known what I was thinking. He sneaked a look back at me; then he sat upon a rock, perfectly still, like the old cat he was.

I would draw that later, I thought, Henry happy in the dark, with the river just a thread curving through the snow.

It took a half-hour to bring everything inside. I wrapped a blanket around Gram, and through the window, I could see the car at the edge of the road. There would be room for it in the shed, I thought, remembering the Old Man's car on one side, the truck on the other.

The truck. Totaled. Was it still there? I shook my head. 'I'll be back,' I said to the sleeping Gram. 'I have to put the Silver Bullet in the shed.'

Are you going to drive it in? Green asked in my head.

You taught me how I said it.

But...

I can do this.

The truck hugged one side of the shed. I walked around to the front of it and ran my fingers over the cold metal, the sharp edges, the empty holes where the lights had been. I raised my hands to my ears

without thinking so I could not hear the truck as it hit the trees that summer evening.

Outside a few minutes later, I turned the key in the Silver Bullet's ignition; the gas gauge was hitting Empty. Just one more bit, I begged the car, that is all I need. I sat there hesitating before I put my foot on the gas, but then I coasted along over the snow, the motor coughing, and glided into the shed- not touching the sides, not even close- braked a split second before I hit the back wall and turned off the motor.

Ah, Green said.

It was quiet, with only the soft whoosh of wind and the muffled sound of icy snow as it blew against the roof. I had done it. All I wanted to do now was curl up under the covers in that small green room upstairs and sleep.

22

Films of Kristen Deniel

For the next few afternoons, around five, the hot cocoa woman called to chitchat. That is what she called it. She was chatting all the time.

‘How was school?’

‘Burned down.’

‘What did you have for lunch?’

‘Horsemeat.’

‘How's Mrs. Cahill?’

‘Who?’

‘What are you drawing?’

‘Nudies.’

‘Kristen,’ she said slowly one night. ‘Mrs. Cahill is old, and she tends to forget.’

Gram dancing in the street, giving me the hat with the veil, making popcorn at the movie.

I said more than I wanted to. 'She doesn't forget everything, just some things.' I stopped. The hot cocoa woman would never change her mind. I raised my hand to the window. Drops of melting sleet were running down the glass. Under the kitchen table, Henry was an orange ball, with only his pointy little chin turned up. Henry hated sleet.

'Tomorrow is Saturday,' the hot cocoa woman began. 'I'll pick you up and take you to meet Eleanor.' She paused.

I did not answer.

'That's her name, Eleanor. She is going to have lunch for us.'

I pulled the telephone cord as far as it could go.

'Then Sunday if all goes well...' She broke off. 'You'd be in the same school. And you could visit Mrs. Cahill often.'

I took the phone away from my ear and put it on the counter. I did it gently so there was no noise. I wondered how long she would keep talking before she figured it out; I was not listening.

It was gray outside. Gram's wooden figures were blurred and bent in the wind that had just come up.

Gram could not stay alone. She might not remember when it was super. She would sit up all night watching movies.

Beatrice. I picked up the phone and pressed the numbers.

It rang about twenty times. The answer, Beatrice. But then I remembered. For the first weeks she would be travelling around, she had said. I pictured her in the desert, the dry sun beating down, her sketchbook in her hand.

I could not leave Gram.

I could not stay.

It was a puzzle.

Something from years ago popped into my head. It was not wintering, it was summer, and so humid everything I touched was sticky. All afternoon I had thought about the pillow on the bed, and how cool it would be against my head. I was surprised when it was as hot as the rest of the room. I reached under the pillow to find something

I had hidden there, a doll with pale painted eyes. I whispered to her, asking if she was cooling off. And then someone came and pulled her away, tossing her on the night table. I waited until the woman walked out the door, and then I whispered a little more loudly so that the doll could hear me.

‘Don't worry,’ I had said.

‘I'll save you in the morning.’

Why had I thought of that now?

Save Gram.

That is why.

The sleet outside was turning to snow. It reminded me of Green's. ‘You'd love the snow in Hancock,’ he had said.

I thought of the summer house in Laurel Highlands. ‘I haven't been here in winter since I was a boy,’ the Old Man had said. ‘But it was wonderful, so cold it hurt your teeth, the river has frozen over, the animals coming up close to the house.’

Everything was silver with ice.’ He had spread his hands wide. ‘Twisted icicles this long hanging from the roof. I used to knock them off and see how far I could throw them.’ He laughed. ‘My father had put in heat, so when you came inside, it was warm. I would dry my hands on the radiator till they almost sizzled.’

Winter.

No one is there in the house in Laurel Highlands. ‘We are staying in our house in Hancock now. Plenty of snow there, and nearer to school and the stores.’

How could I do it?

How could I not?

Gram was napping on the lilac couch. I went in and stood next to her, looking at that beautiful face.

She opened her eyes.

‘How would you like to go away with me?’ I asked.

‘To see Beatrice?’ she said.

I shook my head. 'That's too far.'

'Then where?' She sat up, smoothing her hair with papery thin fingers.

It was hard to get the words out. 'We'll take the car.'

'The Silver Bullet,' she said, nodding.

'It will be an adventure,' I said.

She smiled. 'Henry, you, and I in the Silver Bullet. We will fly to the ends of the earth.'

I smiled back, trying to think. Food, warm clothes, gas for the Silver Bullet.

It was Friday night. The hot cocoa woman would come for me at lunchtime tomorrow.

By then we had to be long gone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

We were frenzied that last week in August. That was Izzy's word: frenzied. And I drew it all:

Green and I are racing along the dirt road to buy beef jerky at the grocery store four miles away.

Sitting on a rock, pulling the jerky against our teeth as we counted the cars that went by on the highway.

Rowing up the river rapids and bouncing back in the rowboat with bruises all over our legs and arms.

Climbing partway up the Old Man's Mountain after the rain, slipping, and sliding in the mud on the edge of the road.

And we never stopped laughing.

Anything so we would not think about my leaving.

Anything.

They told me what they had planned, the four of us sitting on the porch. I never needed a picture of that night. It was in my head, every bit of it, is there forever. But I drew it anyway: Izzy with one of my hands in both of hers, the Old Man reaching out to hug me until I

had no breath left, and green's blinking behind his glasses, trying not to let me see how close to tears he was.

But I knew.

I drew another picture of what happened next. Before I could think, I leaned over to kiss green's cheek, stained with grease from working on the truck, captured there in that drawing forever. Both of us laughed, embarrassed, and Izzy said, 'Lovely. I am going to try that too.' And she leaned over to kiss his other cheek.

We were still laughing as Izzy spread out her long arms.

'It's settled, then,' she said. 'You belong to us. This house ...' 'And the river,' I said.

'...Is yours,' the Old Man said. 'All of it.' 'And Izzy's hard candy,' Green is said, rocking back on his chair, looking happier than he had all summer.

Please let it be all right, I begged, looking at Greens' face, remembering all the arguments he and the Old Man had had: a lost lure yesterday, a rake left in the rain, the truck. Was it because I was there? Was the Old Man comparing him with me? Me? Wasn't that strange? Was trying to fit me into family-like jamming in a puzzle piece that did not match? Would it ruin all the other pieces?

Izzy leaned over. 'Hey, you two, do not look sad. We still had one last weekend. Remember?'

Last weekend.

Last.

I looked up at the mountain. The trees had just a hint of fall color. The mountain looked soft, almost friendly. I thought about standing at the very top.

<3

Interval: 5 Martrace

1

The beginnings-

It just someday in some year- in 1921- she was let in the back of the 1918 Buick Pick up with a wood bed- and was forgotten about even if it was her birthday...

Miss. Darling joined Martrace who had the nickname given of 'Hope-' outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street.

They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up...

-Then and there-

Was the small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop...

And now that they were alone. Martrace (Hope) suddenly became enthusiastically energetic.

And then they came out on the other side of the village... on onto the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few 1921-motorcars in testudo-black.

A valve had burst inside her, and a great gush of energy was being released.

It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling, I do honestly feel I could move anything in the world. not just tipping over glasses and trivial things like that.

I feel...

I... feel... could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling.

Even when people are sitting in the chairs, I think I could push them over. and bigger things too. much bigger things than chairs and tables. She trotted beside Miss.

Darling with uninhabited little hops and her fingers flew as if she would toss them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with tremendous speed.

I must stare at it extremely hard. Miss. Darling. extremely hard.

Like- then I can feel it all fashionable behind my eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were scorching but then again.

I do not mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling. I only must take a moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push them out. this strangeness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough.

2

‘Calm yourself down. youngster. calm yourself down.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the chronicles.’

‘But you do think it is interesting. don't you? Miss. Darling?’

‘Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?’

‘Oh. it is interesting all right.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It is more than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.’

‘They may even be heavenly... Nonetheless, whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.’

‘For the reason that we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good.’

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way.

‘I don't see why we have to be so cautious?’ she said. still hopping about.

‘I am trying to explain to you.’ Miss. Darling said longsuffering...

‘That we are dealing with the unidentified. It is an unexplainable thing...

The right word for it is marvel... It is a- whizz.’ ‘Am I a miracle?’ Martrace asked.

‘It is quite possible that you are.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Nonetheless. I would rather you did not think about yourself as anything now.

What I thought we might do is to explore this genius a little further... just the two of us together; but then again making sure we take things very carefully all the time.'

'You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?'

'That is what I am tempted to suggest.' Miss. Darling said cautiously.

'Goody-good.' Martrace said.

'I.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.'

'Such as what?' Martrace asked.

'Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.'

'What exactly does that word mean?' Martrace said.

'A precocious child.' Miss. Darling said. 'Is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.'

'Am I really?' Martrace asked.

'Of course. you are. You must be aware of that. Look at what you are reading. Look at your mathematics.'

'I suppose you're right.' Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

'I can't help wondering.' she said. 'Whether this sudden ability has come to you. Of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.'

'You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains, so something has to push out?'

'That's not quite what I mean.' Miss. Darling said.

Smiling... 'But whatever happens... and I say it again. We must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten... that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass.'

‘Do you think doing it could actually... hurt me? Is that what you are thinking? Miss. Darling?’

‘It made you feel pretty peculiar... didn't it?’

‘It made me feel lovely.’ Martrace said. ‘For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings.’

Along with say- ‘I told you that.’

And moments later saying- ‘And intend to I tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time... much easier.’

‘It is like anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.’

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast.

3

And it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind them.

It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges.

And the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the chilly winter came along.

There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak, sycamore, and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut.

There was a high hedge of hazel on either side, and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets.

The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon.

Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead. Miss. Darling.

Wishing to change the subject for the moment... gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks.

Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. 'This way.' Miss. Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again.

They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track.

'You mean you live down here?' Martrace asked.

'I do.' Miss. Darling replied... nonetheless, she said nothing more or further.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living.

She had always regarded her purely as a teacher.

A person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again.

Do any of us children... she wondered...

Like- yah- ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone?

Or if there is a mother at home, a sister, or a husband? 'Do you live all by yourself?'

Miss. Darling?' she asked.

'It's just a farm laborer's cottage.' Miss. Darling said. 'You must not expect too much of it. We are there.'

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost buried by the overhanging hazel branches. Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and spoke. 'There it is. That is where I live.'

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said.

'Very much so.'

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane, and you had to watch where you put your feet if you did not want to twist your ankle.

There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage.

The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling.

The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front.

Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was no upstairs to the place.

On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass.

An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches were enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

4

Would you all say that it was cute to see home your mom and dad are with you when you come into their life that loving moment- left in time?

So- even so when they find that their youngster is the most repulsive thing to ever share the same air as they do. It is the grossest thing you could ever imagine or wrap your mind around. They still think that he or she is magnificent or slender.

Some moms and dads go more. extra than others. They develop so-o blinded by admiration. love... consent. with wonder.

The achievement to sway and influence. themselves their youngster has the wherewithal of mastermind.

Really in all fact, there was not a thing wrong with this... at all.

Never- ever- world this is not right. The world just works this way. 'Carry us a washbowl! We are going to be sick!' U-ah- he said...

It is only when the mom and dad begin telling you and me about the wisdom of their own disgusting. suck. twisting scum-sucking butt hole licker's... children. That we shock disturbance.

‘Your son is the best thing ever. You are going to say it.’
...is an over-all wash-out to say.

I have faith that you have a family.

Trade you can thrust or shove him into when he/she leaves school. and because he/she is very sure as all hell he or she will not get a job anyplace otherwise.’ If yours truly were a teacher. I would prepare up some physical scorchers for the kids of loving. devoted. Kissie- Kissie goo-goo- parents.

School educators undergo a good deal from having to listen to this sort of balderdash nonrenewal crap- from gratified close relatives like mom and dad.

Nonetheless, they typically get their own back when the time comes to author the end-of-term reports. Before. as if yours truly were feeling poetic that daylight. I- myself- me- here... might pen down. ‘It is an enquiring actuality. which grasshoppers.

Like- have their hearing-organs on the sides of the abdomen. Your daughter Emma.

She is arbitrating by what she is erudite this period.

Has no audible range-publications at all-to speak of?’

Yeah- I would say I may even investigate an unfathomable into ordinary history and say that. ‘The journal cicada employs seven ages as a nourishment antiestablishment.

as well as no more than seven days as a welcome individual of sunbeams and air. Your son/or girl has paid out seven years as nourishment in this school.

And now we are still in the making for him/her to arise from the cocoon.’

A chiefly mephitic little girl might sting me into proverbsing.

‘Sandy has the same glacial beauty yet so cold-heartedly like a stone. but unlike stone. she has absolutely nothing below the surface- nothing but looks.’

I meditate... I for one might relish writing end-of-term intelligence for the horrors in my class.

Like- however enough of that BS- kids suck lady-nuts. We must get on... with the dumb... for that is all they are- on like this one here that is oh mighty.

And magnificent- in their wisdom. and wonderers' thoughts of the mind.

Frequently- like every so often. one comes across a close relative who takes the contradictory line.

Who shows no notice at all in their youngsters?

And this of course is far worse than the doting ones.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were two such parents.

They had a son called Peter and a daughter called Martrace. and the parents watched upon Martrace in certain as zero zil-notta crap in the bowl- that needed to be plunged and flushed three weeks ago- a

stinking shipping- pill... of doo- no more than a layer over the yellowing pee.

Just crap- something you must put up with. or then get it out and grunt too- until the time comes, you are done with it and zip up- and move on with the day.

Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter beheld accelerative massively to the phase when they could dump their little daughter off- as sh*t and flush her away for their lives.'

If possible, into the next region and or next plant- or even supplementary more than that even.

It is immoral that an adequate quantity of blood treats everyday youngsters as all the same, they were crap and poopy.

On the other hand, it turns out to be one way or another a- lot inferior when the juvenile in inquiry is extraordinary. and by that. I mean complex as well as vivid.

Martrace was both things. On the other hand, above all she was dazzling. Her cognizance was so-o nimble, and she was so quick to learn.

That her capability ought to have been understandable even to the most half-witted of parents.

Nonetheless, Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter were both so-o gorm-less and so-0 enfolded up in their own senseless meaningless. and absurd slight lives that they fail to get or see no matter what infrequent.

Uncommon about their daughter.

To communicate the actuality.

I doubt they would have noticed had she crept into the house with a broken 2 legs one day when they did not see.

By the age of one and a half, her speech was flawless faultless. marvels. as well as she knew as many words as most grown-ups.

The parents... instead of applauding her. called her a noisy blabbermouth and told her abruptly that small girls should be understood and not overheard.

Martrace's brother Peter was a perfectly normal boy. but the sister. as I said. It was something to make your eyes pop.

By the time she was three.

Martrace had taught herself to read by studying newspapers and magazines that lay around the house.

At the age of four.

She could read fast and well, and she naturally began hankering after books.

The only book in the whole of this enlightened household was something called Easy Cooking belonging to her mother.

And when she had read this from cover to cover and had learned all the recipes by heart. She decided she wanted something more interesting. 'Daddy.' she said.

'Do you think you could buy me a book?'

'A book?' he said.

'What do you want a freaking book for dumb butt?' 'To read. Daddy.'

‘What’s wrong with going to see a MOVIE.

For heaven’s sake- a little girl?

We have a lovely MOVIE with a sixty-inch screen and now you come asking for a book to read in have imagination time! You are getting so spoiled. girl!’

Every ordinary midafternoon Martrace was left alone in the household. Her brother (four years older than her...)

She went to school, and she was there to care for herself- yet that is the way she loved it. Ms. Dicksnoter was hooked on being a fashionista. doing hair styling and being a drama queen- and playing the man in bars- when dad was not looking- it five afternoons a week she was seen playing the game- and making her wages in that way- good look as she said to get you far- even if with her that may not be so... Her father went to work- on the railroad... working on steamers... a murky dirty- hot job... where he would pass off crap for good engines... she this here- 1888- you like the wheels are falling off- and the boilers blow- what do I do- I sell it to you- what do you say?

1918 Cadillac is sitting running as they were talking- walking past all the important things and load- like crossing tracks with moving train- at her feet at the age of five- she arrived. she introduced herself to the librarian.

Martrace was in love with the new light- and the cars put along outside- in this small western county town that she was seeing on her way- a way of wonder- and massive thought behind it- looking around all old wood buildings- and dirt roads.

Ms. Smaith. She asked if she might sit awhile and read a book. Ms. Smaith. slightly in awe at the arrival, this tiny young girl- and being- solo- with no parents to behead by. All the same, she told her she was very welcome to look at all the books.

It is like new- better... On the afternoon of the day when her father had refused to buy her a book.

Martrace set out all by herself to walk to the public library in the village. ‘Where are the children’s books, please?’ Martrace asked... softly shyly... where are the kiddie books... ‘They’re over there on those lower shelves- Ms. Smaith told her do you see.’ -Yes- thank you... ‘Would you like me to help you find a nice one with lots of drawings on it... so it not too hard for you to get...?’ ‘No. thank you.’ Martrace said. ‘I’m sure I can accomplish this- feet with no issues or complaints.’

It now dark- she is still sitting there as the gas laps outside flicker... the train- blow got there hunting crays and grind on the rails. House's pass- a man snaps a long photo on a shudder camera... a boy is calling out for newspapers- as the burn burls are light for heat man standing signing old songs- of land- in the cold wicked streets- you can see the puff of their breath... yet she forgot all about the time... lost in the lands of her books. Where there was no pain of heat... just play. Martrace would toddle down to the library like this- every day she could rain- sleet- and mud. It did not matter- there was the girl with long dark hair with the ridden in it- and a sundress reading books.

The walk took only ten minutes. and this allowed her two glorious hours sitting quietly by herself in a cozy corner devouring one book after another. When she had read every single child's book in the place. she started wandering around in search of something else.

Ms. Smaith. Who had been watching her with charm for the past few weeks? Now she got up from her desk and went over to her yet in admiration. 'Can I help you? Martrace?' she asked.

'I'm deliberating what to read next.' Martrace said. 'I've finished all the children's books.' All 500 she said.

Yes- 'You mean you've looked at the pictures?'

NO...! um- 'Yes. but I have read the books as also.'

Ms. Smaith gazed downwards at Martrace from her great height. which was only like three feet. and Martrace looked right back up at her towering.

'I thought some were very underprivileged.' Martrace said. 'But others were lovely. I liked Engen 14, which was the best of them all- she carried it out. It was full of specifics. The mystery of the room behind the closed door and the mystery of the garden behind the big wall.' Ms. Smaith was dumbfounded by this girl's considerations and words. "Exactly how old are you, little girl. Martrace?" she asked. 'Five years and one month.' Martrace said timidly.

Ms. Smaith was more stunned than ever. but she had the sense not to show it. 'What sort of a book would you like to read next?' she asked.

Martrace said. 'I would like a good one that grown-ups read. A famous one. I do not know any names.'

Ms. Smaith looked along the shelves. taking her time. She did not know what to bring out. How. she asked herself. does one

choose a famous grown-up book for a four-year-old girl? Her first thought was to pick a young teenager's romance of the kind that is written for fifteen-year-old schoolchildren.

But for some reason, she found herself instinctively walking past that shelf.

'Try this,' she said at last. 'It is incredibly famous and particularly good. If it is too long for you, just let me know and I will find something shorter and a bit easier.'

'Great Expectations,' Martrace read. 'By Charles Dickens.'

I would love to try it.'

I must be mad. Ms. Smaith told herself, but to Martrace she said.

'Of course, you may try it.'

Over the next few afternoons, Ms. Smaith could hardly take her eyes off the small girl sitting for hour after hour in the big armchair at the far end of the room with the book on her lap.

It was necessary to rest it on the lap because it was too heavy for her to hold up, which meant she had to sit leaning forward to read.

And a strange sight it was, this tiny dark-haired person sitting there with her feet nowhere near touching the floor.

Absorbed in the wonderful adventures of Pip and old Miss Havisham and her cobwebbed house and by the spell of magic that Dickens, the great storyteller, had woven with his words. The only movement from the reader was the lifting of the hand now and then to turn over a page, and Ms. Smaith always felt sad when the time came for her to cross the floor and say, 'It is ten to five. Martrace.'

During the first week of Martrace's visits, Ms. Smaith had said to her, 'Does your mother walk you down here every day and then take you home?'

'My mother goes to Aylesbury every afternoon to play bingo.'

Martrace had said, 'She doesn't know I came here.'

‘But that's surely not right.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘I think you'd better ask her.’

‘I'd rather not.’ Martrace said. ‘She does not encourage reading books. Nor does my father.’

‘But what do they expect you to do every afternoon in an empty house?’

‘Just mooch around and watch the telly.’

‘I see.’

‘She doesn't care what I do.’ Martrace said a little sadly.

Ms. Smaith was concerned about the child's safety on the walk through the busy village, Love Street, and the crossing of the road. but she decided not to interfere.

Within a week. Martrace had finished *Great Expectations*, of which in that edition contained four hundred and eleven pages. ‘I loved it.’ she said to Ms. Smaith. ‘Has Mr. Dickens written any others?’

‘A substantial number.’ said the astounded Ms. Smaith. ‘Intend to I choose you another?’

Over the next six months. under Ms. Smaith's watchful and compassionate eye. Martrace read the following books:

- *Nicholas Nickleby* by Charles Dickens
- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte
- *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy
- *Nevaeh* by: Marcel Ray Duriez
- *Gone to Earth* by Mary Webb
- *White Fang* by Jack London
- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley

- The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
- Brighton Rock by Graham Greene
- The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner
- The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck the Good

Companions by J. B. Priestley

- Kim by Rudyard Kipling
- Animal Farm by George Orwell
- The Invisible Man by H. G. Wells

It was a formidable list and by now Ms. Smaith was filled with wonder and excitement. but it was a good thing that she did not allow herself to be completely carried away by it all.

Anyone else witnessing the achievements of this small child would have been tempted to make a great fuss and shout the news all over the village and beyond. but not so Ms. Smaith.

She was someone who minded her own business and had long since discovered it was seldom worthwhile interfering with other people's children.

‘Mr. Hemingway says a lot of things I don't understand.’

Martrace said to her. ‘Especially about men and women.’

‘Nonetheless, I loved it all the same. The way he tells it I am right there on the spot watching it all happen.’

"A fine writer will always make you feel that.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘And do not worry about the bits you cannot understand.

Sit back and allow the words to wash around you. like music.’

‘I will. I will.’

‘Did you know?’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘That public libraries like this allow you to borrow books and take them home?’

‘I didn't know that.’ Martrace said. ‘Could I, do it?’

‘Of course.’ Ms. Smaith said. ‘When you have chosen the book, you want. Bring it to me so I can make a note of it, and it is yours for two weeks. You can take more than one if you wish.’

From then on. Martrace would visit the library only once a week to take out new books and return the old ones.

Her small bedroom now became her reading-room and... there she would sit and read most afternoons.

Often with a mug of hot chocolate beside her. She was not tall enough to reach things around the kitchen.

But she kept a small box in the outhouse which she brought in and stood on to get whatever she wanted.

Mostly it was hot chocolate she made. warming the milk in a saucepan on the stove before mixing it. Occasionally she made Bovril or Ovaltine. It was pleasant to take a hot drink up to her room and have it beside her as she sat in her silent room reading in the empty house in the afternoons.

The books transported her into new worlds and familiarized her with amazing people who lived exciting lives.

She went on olden day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad.

She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.

6

The First Phenomenon-

The Mcfarts seated herself overdue at the teacher's table. Martrace sat down again at her school desk.

Still holding the pitcher by the handle but not invigorating it hitherto. she spoke. ‘I have never- ever been able to comprehend why small children are so revolting.

It was the first time she had to sit down- freaking sit- down throughout the class.

Then she got hold of out a hand and took hold of her water-pitcher.

They should be set free as early as conceivable.

They are the misery of my life. They are like creatures.

We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by droopy up
flypaper.

I have often thought of discovering a spray to get rid of
small youngsters.

Otherwise better still. some huge strips of gluey paper.

How marvelous it would be to walk into this schoolroom
with enormous spray-pistols in my hands and start thrusting it.

I would hang them all around the school and you would all
get stuck to them and that would be the end of it.

Wouldn't that be a clever idea?

Miss. Darling?'

'If it is meant to be a joke. Principal. I do not think it is a
very funny one.' Miss. Darling said from the back of the classroom
during the lecture.

The women mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She is
rounded the twist. She is the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water-jug
and poured some water into her glass. 'You would not. would you.
Miss. Darling.' the Mcfarts said. 'And it is not meant to be a joke. My
idea of a picture-perfect school. Miss. Darling. has no youngsters in it
at all were there all in the graveyard not talking back?

Um-hum- stone-cold quit- they hear you that way... like
living under a rock... she said back. One of these days I intend to start
up a school like that. I think it will be amazingly effective to freaking
dumb- playing with themselves.'

I like you did- Missy... over there... as a girl. As well as
unexpectedly. with water. out came the stretched sycophantic lizard
straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as
though a firecracker had gone off beneath her.

As well as now the children also saw the long thin slimy yellow-bellied lizard-like mortal meandering and revolving relaxing-spinning- like in the glass.

And they wriggled and jumped about as well. shouting.

Oh. It is disgusting! It is a serpent! It is a baby queue! It is an alligator!’

‘What is it?

‘Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!’ cried Dasey. ‘I’ll bet it bites!’

She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness.

Natural history was not her strong point.

She had not the faintest idea what this thing was.

The Mcfarts.

This womanly giant. stood there in her green breeches. trembling like a blancmange. She stared at the creature snaking and wriggling in the glass. Inquisitively enough. She had never seen a newt before. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Gradually she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more frightened than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were shouldering in her small black eyes.

‘Martrace!’ she barked. ‘Stand up!’

‘Who. me?’ Martrace said. ‘What have I done?’

‘Stand up. You are revolting little cock-suck!’

‘I have not done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. honestly. I have not. I have never seen that slimy thing before!’

‘Stand up at once. your filthy little piss-puss-squirt!’

On the other hand. She was certainly not about to own up. Unenthusiastically. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She had not intended to get her friend into trouble.

I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front door with hockey-sticks! "You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious tiny brute!"

The Mcfarts were shouting. 'You are not fit to be in this school- you suck at life- and should kill yourself now and get it over with! You ought to be behind bars.

That is where you ought to be! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!"

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiled color and little flecks of froth were gathering... at the corners of her mouth.

Nonetheless, she was not the only one who was losing her cool. She could see the justice of that. It was, however, a new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she had not committed. Martrace was also beginning to see red.

She did not in the least mind being accused of having done something she had done. She had had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. 'I did not do it!' she screamed. By holly freaking farting golly, she thought.

That awful Mcfarts is not going to iota this one on me! The Mcfarts roared back 'Oh yes, you did!' 'Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father was right to warn me about you!' The woman seemed to have lost the regulator of herself entirely. She was ranting like a fanatic- and freaking out. 'You are finished in this school, young lady!' she shouted. 'You are finished everywhere. I intend to see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their fertilizers on you! You will never become exposed again!"

7

'I'm telling you I did not do it!' Martrace screamed. 'I've never even seen a creature like that in my life!"

'You have put a- a- a fuc- fa- frack freaking- queue in my drinking water!' (She holds her words back) the Mcfarts yelled back. 'There is no worse crime in the world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and do not say a word! Go on, sit down at once!"

‘Nevertheless. I am telling you.’ Martrace shouted... refusing to sit down.

The Mcfarts were sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now, quite slowly. There began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity was gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in her eyes. a feeling of great strength was settling deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which something was else altogether.

And which she could not understand. It was like flashes of lightning. Little waves of lightning were flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass.

...And now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger, and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at.

‘Tip it!’ Martrace whispered. ‘Tip it over!’

‘I am telling you to shut up!’ the Mcfarts roared. ‘If you do not shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!’

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh. the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she had not done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier. and angrier. and angrier. so-o unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts.

How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it.

She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents. newt and all. over the Mcfarts's head.

She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

‘Tip it!’ she whispered again. ‘Tip it over!’

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still, willing her eyes to shoot out more power.

And then... very slowly.

So slowly she could hardly see it happening. The glass began to lean backward, farther and farther and farther back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base.

And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle onto the desktop.

The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's enormous bosom. The principal let out a yell that must have rattled every windowpane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket.

The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt, she decided, was a useful thing to have around?

The Mcfarts. Her face is more like a boiled ham than ever, was standing before the class quivering with fury. She saw the glass wobble. It tilted backward a fraction of an inch, then righted itself again. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had soaked right through to her skin. ‘Who did it?’ she roared. Who is guilty of this filthy profession?

Who pushed over this glass?’ ‘Come on- come on! Own up your hood liker! Step forward! You will not escape this time! She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes, feeling the power that was alternating straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs. Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb. ‘Martrace!’ she roared. ‘It was you! I know it was you!’ Martrace, in the second row, sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and suddenly, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world.

With the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do whatsoever.

‘Speak up say it- ball groper. you clotted carbuncle!’ roared the Mcfarts.

‘Admit that you did it!’

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise against the Headmistress. ‘None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling answered. ‘I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her desk all the time you have been here. except for Tom and he has not moved from his corner.’ ‘She didn’t move!’ they cried out.

‘Martrace did not move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!’ Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. ‘I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.’ ‘I most certainly did not knock it over myself!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?’

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze without flinching. ‘I am telling you the truth. Principal.’ she said. ‘You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.’

‘I am fed up with your useless bunch of midgets!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!’ And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. ‘Phew!’ she said. ‘I think we have had enough school for one day. don’t you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to the playground and wait for your parents to take you home.’

The Second Miracle-

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. She remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful.

She knew she had to tell somebody about what had happened with the glass. She could not keep a gigantic secret like that

bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. They certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon.

Impulsively. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and spoke.

‘Well. Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?’

8

Martrace said. ‘Please, may I talk to you for a moment?’

‘Of course, you may. What is troubling you?’

‘Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. There was Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

‘Yes. Martrace.’ she said. ‘Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.’

‘Miss. Mcfarts is not going to expel me. is she?’ Martrace asked. ‘Because it was not me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it was not.’

‘I know it wasn't.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Am I going to be expelled?’

‘I think not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. That is all.’

‘Good.’ Martrace said. ‘But that isn’t what I want to talk to you about.’

‘What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?’

‘I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.’ Martrace said. ‘You saw it spilling all over Miss.

Mcfarts. didn’t you?’

‘I did indeed.’

‘Well. Miss. Darling. I did not touch it. I never went near it.’

‘I know you didn’t.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You heard me telling the

Principal that it could not have been you.’

‘Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That’s exactly what I want to talk to you about.’

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. ‘I don’t think I quite follow you.’ she said.

‘I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn’t done that I made it happen.’

‘You made that happen. Martrace?’

‘I made the glass tip over.’

‘I still don’t quite understand what you mean.’ Miss. Darling said gently.

‘I did it with my eyes.’ Martrace said. ‘I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them, and the glass just toppled over.’

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

‘I am still not following you.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you mean you willed the glass to tip over?’

‘Yes.’ Martrace said. ‘With my eyes.’

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. ‘You mean you were sitting where you are now, and you told the glass to topple over, and it did?’

‘Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.’

‘If you did that. then it is about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.’

‘I did it. Miss. Darling.’

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. How often do small children have flights of fancy like this?

She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. ‘Could you do it again?’ She asked. kindly.

‘I don't know.’ Martrace said. ‘But I think I might be able to.’

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. ‘Should I put water in it?’ she asked. smiling a little.

‘I don't think it matters.’ Martrace said.

‘Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.’

‘It may take some time.’

Take all the time you want.’ Miss. Darling said. I am in no hurry.’

Martrace. sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this time she gave the order right at the beginning.

‘Tip glass. tip!’ she ordered. but her lips did not move, and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head. And now she concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge, and the hotness was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass.

and without making any sound at all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over.

She saw it wobble. then it tilted. Then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle onto the table-top not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She did not say a word. She could not. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb.

She gaped at the glass. leaning far away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted her head and looked at Martrace.

She saw the child white in the face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. My whole face was transfigured. Her eyes were round and bright, and she was sitting there speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. 'I'm all right.' she said and smiled. 'I am quite all right. Miss. Darling. so do not be alarmed.'

'You seemed so far away.' Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

'Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.'

Martrace said. 'It was wonderful.'

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning of the World. The First Morning.

'It went much quicker this time.' Martrace said quietly.

'It's not possible!' Miss. Darling was gasping. 'I do not believe it! I simply do not believe it!' She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. 'Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?' she asked.

‘Oh. I would love to.’ Martrace said.

‘Good. Gather up your things and I will meet you outside in a couple of minutes.’

‘You will not tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I wouldn't dream of it.’ Miss. Darling said.

The following morning. just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage. Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick to hook the hat off the peg. and even then, she only just made it. The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez's feather stuck in the hatband and Mr. Dicksnoter were immensely proud of it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look. especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace. holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other. proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all-round the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back onto the peg with the walking stick. She timed this operation very carefully. applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter did not notice anything when he put the hat on. but when he arrived at the garage, he could not get it off.

Superglue is immensely powerful stuff. so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter did not want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the entire day long. even when putting sawdust in gearboxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill.

To save face. He adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it. like gangsters do in films.

When he got home that evening, he still could not take the hat off.

‘Don't be silly.’ his wife said. ‘Come here. I will take it off for you.’

She gave the hat a sharp yak. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled the windowpanes. ‘Ow-w-w!’ he screamed.

‘Don't do that! Let us go! You will take half the skin off my forehead!’

Martrace nestling in her usual chair, was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

‘What's the matter, daddy?’ she said. ‘Has your head suddenly swollen or something?’

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion, but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘It must be Superglue. It could not be anything else. That will teach you to go play around with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.’

‘I haven't touched the flaming stuff!’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.’

Always follow the instructions on the label.’

‘What in heaven's name are you talking about, your stupid witch?’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted, clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. ‘D 'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?’

Martrace said. ‘There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.’

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. ‘What happened to him?’ he spluttered.

‘The finger got stuck inside his nose.’ Martrace said. ‘And he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him. ‘Stop picking your nose.’ and he could not do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.’

‘Serve him right.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘He should not have put his finger up there in the first place. It is a nasty habit. If all children had

Superglue put on their fingers they would soon stop doing it.’

Martrace said. 'Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.'

'That's quite enough from you.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he got up to bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so did his wife. but it would not budge. 'How am I going to have my shower?' he demanded.

'You'll just have to do without it. will not you.' his wife told him. And later. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. 'Now do stop fussing around.' his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. 'I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.'

But it was not lost by the morning, and it would not slip off. So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back.

She had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk.

And in the front. where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. There remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

At breakfast, Martrace said to him. 'You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you have little brown insects crawling about all over you. People will think you have lice.'

'Be quiet!' the father snapped. 'Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!'

Overall, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

Martrace's parents owned quite a nice house with three bedrooms upstairs. While on the ground floor, there was a dining room and a living room, and a kitchen. Her father was a dealer in second-hand cars, and he did well at it.

'Sawdust,' he would say proudly. 'Is one of the great secrets of my success. And it costs me nothing. I get it free from the sawmill.'

'What do you use it for?' Martrace asked him.

'Ha!' the father said. 'Wouldn't you like to know?'

'I do not see how sawdust can help you to sell second-hand cars, daddy.'

'That's because you're an ignorant little twit,' the father said. His speech was never very delicate, but Martrace was used to it. She also knew that he liked to boast, and she would egg him on shamelessly.

'You must be very clever to find a use for something that costs nothing,' she said. 'I wish I could do it.'

'You couldn't,' the father said. 'You're too stupid. But I do not mind telling young Mike here about it seeing he will be joining me on business one day.' Ignoring Martrace. He turned to his son and spoke. 'I am always glad to buy a car when some fool has been crashing the gears so badly, they are all worn out and rattle like mad. I got it cheap. Then all I do is mix a lot of sawdust with the oil in the gearbox and it runs as sweet as a nut.'

'How long will it run like that before it starts rattling again?' Martrace asked him.

'Long enough for the buyer to get a good distance away,' the father said, grinning. 'About a hundred miles.' 'But that is dishonest, daddy,' Martrace said. 'It's cheating.'

'No one ever got rich being honest,' the father said.

9

'Customers are there to be diddled.'

Mr. Dicksnoter was a small ratty-looking man whose front teeth stuck out underneath a thin ratty mustache.

He liked to wear jackets with large brightly colored checks, and he sported ties that were usually yellow or pale green. 'Now take mileage for instance,' he went on. 'Anyone who is buying a secondhand car. The first thing he wants to know is how many miles it has done. Right?'

'Right.' the son said.

'So, I buy an old dump that has about a hundred and fifty thousand miles on the clock. I got it cheap. But no one's going to buy it with mileage like that. are they?'

And these days you cannot just take the speedometer out and fiddle the numbers back as you used to ten years ago. They have fixed it, so it is impossible to tamper with it unless you are a ruddy watchmaker or something. So, what do I do? I use my brain. Laddie-that is what I do.'

'How?' young Peter asked. fascinated. He seemed to have inherited his father's love of crookery.

'I sit down and say to myself. How can I convert a mileage reading of one hundred and fifty thousand into only ten thousand without taking the speedometer to pieces? Well. If I were to drive the car backward for long enough, then obviously that would do it. The numbers would click backward. wouldn't they? But who is going to drive a flaming car in reverse for thousands and thousands of miles? You could not do it!'

'Of course, you couldn't.' young Peter said.

'So-o I scratch my head.' the father said. 'I use my brains. When you have been given a fine brain as I have. You must use it. And suddenly. the answer hits me. I tell you. I felt exactly like that other brilliant person must have felt when he discovered penicillin. 'Eureka!' I cried. 'I've got it!''

'What did you do. dad?' the son asked him.

'The speedometer.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'Is run off a cable that is coupled up to one of the front wheels. So first I disconnect the cable where it joins the front wheel. Next. I get one of those high-speed electric drills and me couple that up to the end of the cable in such a way that when the drill turns. it turns the cable backward. Did you get me so far? You are following me?'

‘Yes. daddy.’ young Peter said.

‘These drills run at a tremendous speed.’ the father said. ‘So, when I switch on the drill the mileage numbers on the speedo spin backward at a fantastic rate. I can knock fifty thousand miles off the clock in a few minutes with my high-speed electric drill. And by the time I have finished. The car's only done ten thousand and it is ready for sale. ‘She's almost new.’ I say to the customer. ‘She's hardly done ten thou. Belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping.’ ‘

‘Can you turn the mileage back with an electric drill?’ young Peter asked.

‘I'm telling you trade secrets.’ the father said. ‘So, do not you go talking about this to anyone else. You do not want me to put in a jug. do you?’

‘I won't tell a soul.’ the boy said. ‘Do you do this too many cars? Dad?’

‘Every single car that comes through my hands gets the treatment.’ the father said. ‘They all have their mileage cut to under ten thou before they are offered for sale. And to think I invented that all by myself.’ he added proudly. ‘It's made me a mint.’

Martrace. who had been listening closely. said? ‘But daddy. That is even more dishonest than sawdust. It is disgusting.

You are cheating people who trust you.’

‘If you don't like it then don't eat the food in this house.’ the father said. ‘It's bought with the profits.’

‘It's dirty money.’ Martrace said. ‘I hate it.’

Two red spots appear on the father's cheeks. ‘Who the heck do you think you are.’ he shouted. ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury or something. preaching to me about honesty? You are just an ignorant little squirt who has not the foggiest idea what you are talking about!’

‘Quite right. Harry.’ the mother said. And to Martrace she said. ‘You've got a nerve talking to your father like that. Now keep your nasty mouth shut so we can all watch this program in peace.’

They were in the living room eating their suppers on their knees in front of the telly. The suppers were MOVIE dinners in floppy aluminum containers with separate compartments for the stewed meat.

The boiled potatoes and the peas. Ms. Dicksnoter sat munching her meal with her eyes glued to the Am-Jenniean soap opera on the screen. She was a large woman whose hair was dyed platinum blond-haired person except where you could see the mousy brown bits growing out from the roots. She wore heavy makeup, and she had one of those unfortunate bulging figures where the flesh is strapped all around the body to prevent it from falling out.

‘Mummy.’ Martrace said. ‘Would you mind if I ate my supper in the dining room so I could read my book?’

The father glanced up sharply. ‘I would mind!’ he snapped. ‘Supper is a family gathering and no one leaves the table till it's over!’

‘But we're not at the table.’ Martrace said. ‘We never are.

We are always eating off our knees and watching the telly.

‘What's wrong with watching the telly. may I ask?’ the father said. His voice had suddenly become soft and dangerous.

Martrace did not trust herself to answer him. So, she kept quiet. She could feel the anger boiling up inside her.

She knew it was wrong to hate her parents like this. but she was finding it extremely hard not to do so.

All the reading she had done had given her a view of life that they had never seen. If only they read a little Dickens or Kipling, they would soon discover there was more to life than cheating people and watching television.

Another thing. She resented being told constantly that she was ignorant and stupid when she knew she was not.

The anger inside her went on boiling and boiling. and as she lay in bed that night, she decided. She decided that every time her father or her mother was beastly to her.

she would get her own back in some way or another. A small victory or two would help her to tolerate their idiocies and would stop her from going crazy. You must remember that she was still hardly five years old, and it is not easy for somebody as small as that to score points against an all-powerful grown-up. Even so. She was determined to have a go. Her father. after what had happened in front of the telly that evening. was first on her list...

Later that day, the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime, Mr. Trilby, the Deputy Head, telephoned her house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over, Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village, the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House, tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out, 'Is anybody at home?' No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it, and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything was normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes, underclothes, or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She has done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself, and he went away to inform the school Governors that the Headmistress had vanished.

On the second morning, Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will of her late father, Dr. Darling, had suddenly and mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death, Miss. Darling had been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House, which until recently had been occupied by Miss Agatha Mcfarts.

They will also show her father's lifetime savings. Fortunately, we are still safely in the bank, had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly call into

the office as soon as possible. Then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that. and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House. the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on. Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school. and a close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school. Momentous changes were also taking place. As soon as it became clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. The excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that. Martrace was moved up into the top form where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later. Martrace was having tea with

Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did. when Martrace said suddenly. ‘Something strange has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

‘Tell me about it.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘This morning.’ Martrace said. ‘Just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I could not do it. Nothing moved. I did not even feel the heat building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I have lost it completely.’

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. ‘I’ve been expecting something like that to happen.’ she said.

‘You have? Why?’ Martrace asked.

‘Well.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It is only a guess. but here is what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do. nothing to make you struggle. Your enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to go. and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep

busy. which is great. That is only a theory. mind you. and it may be a silly one. but I do not think it is far off the mark.'

'I'm glad it's happened.' Martrace said. 'I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.'

'You've done enough.' Miss. Darling said. 'I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.'

Martrace. who was perched on a tall stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She felt completely comfortable in her presence. and the two of them talked to each other as equals.

'Did you know?' Martrace said suddenly. 'That the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?'

'I did not.' Miss. Darling said smiling. 'How fascinating. Where did you read that?'

'In a book from the library.' Martrace said. 'And that means it goes so fast you cannot even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.'

'It must.' Miss. Darling said.

'And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?' Martrace asked.

11

'Tell me.' Miss. Darling said. smiling again.

'It's not as fast as a mouse.' Martrace said. 'It is three hundred times a minute. But even so. You would not have thought it went as fast as that of a creature that moves so slowly. would you. Miss. Darling?'

'I certainly wouldn't.' Miss. Darling said. 'Tell me one more.'

'A horse.' Martrace said. 'That's slow. It is only forty times a minute.'

This child. Miss. Darling told herself. seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer, and then, at about six o'clock, Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parents' house, which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her gate, she saw a large black Mercedes motorcar parked outside. She did not take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house, she was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

'What on earth's going on?' she cried. 'What's happening, daddy?'

'We're off,' Mr. Dicksnoter said, not looking up. 'We're leaving for the airport in half an hour, so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs already to go. Get a move on, girl! Get going!'

'Off?' Martrace cried out. 'Where to?'

'Spain,' the father said. 'It's a better climate than this lousy country.'

'Spain!' Martrace cried. 'I do not want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!'

'Just do as you're told and stop arguing,' the father snapped. 'I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!'

'But daddy,' Martrace began.

'Shut up!' the father shouted. 'We're leaving in thirty minutes! I am not missing that plane!'

'But how long for, daddy?' Martrace cried. 'When are we coming back?'

'We aren't,' the father said. 'Now beat it! I am busy!'

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house, and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden, standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

‘My. me!’ she said. ‘What in the world is the matter?’

Martrace stood before her, panting, out of breath. Her small face flushed crimson all over.

‘They’re leaving!’ she cried. ‘They’ve all gone mad and they’re filling their suitcases and they’re leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!’

‘Who is?’ Miss. Darling asked quietly.

‘Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I’ve got to go with them!’

‘You mean for a holiday?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘Forever!’ Martrace cried. ‘Daddy said we were never coming back!’

There was a brief silence, then Miss. Darling said.
‘Actually

I am not incredibly surprised.’

‘You mean you knew they were going?’ Martrace cried.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘No, darling,’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I did not know they were going.

But the news still does not surprise me.’

‘Why?’ Martrace cried. ‘Please tell me why.’ She was still out of breath from the running and the shock of it all.

‘Because of your father,’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. He is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He is in it deep.’ Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. ‘People brought stolen cars to your father’s workshop where he changed the numberplates, resprayed the bodies, and assorted color and all the rest of it. And now somebody has tipped him off that the police are on to him, and he is doing what they all do, running off to Spain where they cannot get him. He will have been sending his money out there for years, all ready and waiting for him to arrive.’

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening, and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

‘I don't want to go with them!’ Martrace shouted suddenly.

‘I won't go with them.’

‘I'm afraid you must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I want to live here with you.’ Martrace cried out. ‘Please let me live here with you!’

‘I only wish you could.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I am afraid it is not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to.’

They have a right to take you with them.’

‘But what if they agreed?’ Martrace cried eagerly. ‘What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?’

Miss. Darling said softly. ‘Yes. that would be heaven.’

‘Well. I think they might!’ Martrace cried. ‘I honestly think they might! They do not care tuppence about me!’ ‘Not so fast.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘We've got to be fast!’ Martrace cried. ‘They're leaving any moment! Come on!’ she shouted. grasping Miss. Darling's hand. ‘Please come with me and ask them! But we will have to hurry! We will have to run!’

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out onto the road. and Martrace was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black Mercedes was still outside and now its boot, and all its doors were open, and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like ants. piling on the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

‘Daddy and mummy!’ Martrace burst out, gasping for breath. ‘I do not want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you permit me! Please say yes! Go on, daddy, say yes!

Say yes, mummy!’

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. ‘You’re that teacher woman who once came here to see me, aren’t you?’ he said. Then he went back to put the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. ‘This one will have to go on the back seat.

There is no more room in the boot.’

‘I would love to have Martrace,’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I would look after her with loving care, Mr. Dicksnoter, and I would pay for everything. She would not cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace’s. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.’

‘Come on, Harry,’ the mother said, pushing a suitcase into the back seat. ‘Why don’t we let her go if that is what she wants. It will be one less time to look after.’

‘I’m in a hurry,’ the father said. ‘I have a plane to catch. If she wants to stay, let her stay. It is fine with me.’

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling’s arms and hugged her, and Miss. Darling hugged her back, and then the mother, father, and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming. The brother gave a wave through the rear window, but the other two did not even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

The hat itself was one of those flat-topped pork-pie jobs with a Duriez’s feather stuck in the hatband and Mr. Dicksnoter were immensely proud of it. The following morning, just before the father left for his beastly second-hand car garage, Martrace slipped into the cloakroom and got hold of the hat he wore each day to work. She had to stand on her toes and reach up as high as she could with a walking-stick to hook the hat off the peg, and even then, she only just made it. He thought it gave him a rakish daring look.

Especially when he wore it at an angle with his loud checked jacket and green tie.

Martrace, holding the hat in one hand and a thin tube of Superglue in the other, proceeded to squeeze a line of glue very neatly all around the inside rim of the hat. Then she carefully hooked the hat back onto the peg with the walking-stick. She timed this operation very carefully, applying the glue just as her father was getting up from the breakfast table.

Mr. Dicksnoter did not notice anything when he put the hat on, but when he arrived at the garage, he could not get it off. Superglue is immensely powerful stuff, so powerful it will take your skin off if you pull too hard. Mr. Dicksnoter did not want to be scalped so he had to keep the hat on his head the entire day long, even when putting sawdust in gearboxes and fiddling the mileages of cars with his electric drill. To save face, He adopted a casual attitude hoping that his staff would think that he meant to keep his hat on all day long just for the heck of it, like gangsters do in films.

When he got home that evening, he still could not take the hat off.

‘Don't be silly,’ his wife said. ‘Come here. I will take it off for you.’

She gave the hat a sharp yak. Mr. Dicksnoter let out a yell that rattled the windowpanes. ‘Ow-w-w!’ he screamed. ‘Don't do that!’

Let us go! You will take half the skin off my forehead!’

Martrace, nestling in her usual chair, was watching this performance over the rim of her book with some interest.

‘What's the matter, daddy?’ she said. ‘Has your head suddenly swollen or something?’

The father glared at his daughter with deep suspicion, but said nothing. How could he? Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. ‘It must be Superglue. It could not be anything else. That will teach you to go play around with nasty stuff like that. I expect you were trying to stick another feather in your hat.’

‘I haven't touched the flaming stuff!’ Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. He turned and looked again at Martrace who looked back at him with large innocent brown eyes.

Ms. Dicksnoter said to him. 'You should read the label on the tube before you start messing with dangerous products.

Always follow the instructions on the label.'

'What in heaven's name are you talking about. your stupid witch?' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. clutching the brim of his hat to stop anyone trying to pull it off again. 'D'you think I'm so stupid I'd glue this thing to my head on purpose?'

Martrace said. 'There's a boy down the road who got some Superglue on his finger without knowing it and then he put his finger to his nose.'

Mr. Dicksnoter jumped. 'What happened to him?' he spluttered.

'The finger got stuck inside his nose.' Martrace said. 'And he had to go around like that for a week. People kept saying to him. 'Stop picking your nose.' and he could not do anything about it. He looked an awful fool.'

'Serve him right.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. 'He should not have put his finger up there in the first place. It is a nasty habit. If all children had Superglue put on their fingers, they would soon stop doing it.'

Martrace said. 'Grown-ups do it too. mummy. I saw you doing it yesterday in the kitchen.'

'That's quite enough from you.' Ms. Dicksnoter said. turning pink.

Mr. Dicksnoter had to keep his hat on all through supper in front of the television. He looked ridiculous and he stayed very silent.

When he got up to bed, he tried again to get the thing off. and so did his wife. but it would not budge. 'How am I going to have my shower?' he demanded.

'You'll just have to do without it. will not you.' his wife told him. And later. as she watched her skinny little husband skulking around the bedroom in his purple-striped pajamas with a pork-pie hat on his head. she thought how stupid he looked. Hardly the kind of man a wife dreams about. she told herself.

Mr. Dicksnoter discovered that the worst thing about having a permanent hat on his head was having to sleep in it.

It was impossible to lie comfortably on the pillow. 'Now do stop fussing around.' his wife said to him after he had been tossing and turning for about an hour. 'I expect it will be loose by the morning and then it'll slip off easily.'

But it was not lost by the morning, and it would not slip off.

So, Ms. Dicksnoter took a pair of scissors and cut the thing off his head. bit by bit. first the top and then the brim. Where the inner band had stuck to the hair all around the sides and back. She had to chop the hair off right to the skin so that he finished with a bald white ring round his head. like some sort of a monk. And in the front, where the band had stuck directly to the bare skin. There remained a whole lot of small patches of brown leathery stuff that no amount of washing would get off.

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At breakfast, Martrace said to him. 'You must try to get those bits off your forehead. daddy. It looks as though you have little brown insects crawling all over you. People will think you have lice.'

'Be quiet!' the father snapped. 'Just keep your nasty mouth shut. will you!'

Overall, it was a most satisfactory exercise. But it was surely too much to hope that it had taught the father a permanent lesson.

The hunting- There was comparative calm in the Dicksnoter household for about a week after the Superglue episode. The experience had chastened Mr. Dicksnoter and he seemed temporary

to have lost his taste for boasting and bullying.

Then suddenly he struck again. He had had a dreadful day at the garage and had not sold enough crummy secondhand cars. Many things make a man irritable when he arrives home from work in the evening and a sensible wife will usually notice the storm-signals and will leave him alone until he simmers down.

When Mr. Dicksnoter arrived back from the garage that evening his face was as dark as a thundercloud and somebody was clearly for the high jump soon. His wife recognized the signs immediately and made herself scarce. He then strode into the living room. Martrace happened to be curled up in an armchair in the corner.

absorbed in a book. Mr. Dicksnoter switched on the television. The screen lit up. The program blared. Mr. Dicksnoter glared at Martrace. She had not moved. She had somehow trained herself by now to block her ears to the ghastly sound of the dreaded box. She kept right on reading, and for some reason, this exasperated the father. 'What is this trash?' he said, snatching the book from her hands.

His anger was intensified because he saw her getting pleasure from something that was beyond his reach.

'Don't you ever stop reading?' He snapped at her.

'Oh. Hello daddy.' she said pleasantly. 'Did you have a good day?'

'It is not trash, daddy. It is lovely. It is called The Red Pony. It is by John Steinbeck, an Armenian writer. Why don't you try it? You will love it.'

'Filth.' Mr. Dicksnoter said. 'If it is by an Am-Jennian it is certain to be filth. That is all they write about.'

'No daddy. It is beautiful. Honestly, it is. It is about.'

'I don't want to know what it's about.' Mr. Dicksnoter barked. 'I am fed up with your reading anyway. Find yourself something useful to do.' With alarming abruptness. He now began ripping the pages out of the book in handfuls and throwing them in the waste-paper basket.

Martrace froze in horror and complete fear. The father kept going. There seemed little doubt that the man felt jealousy. How dare she, he was saying with each rip of a page. How dare she enjoy reading books when he could not? How dare she?

'Then you will have to buy another one, won't you?' the father said, still tearing out pages. 'You'll have to save your pocket-money until there is enough in the kitty to buy a new one for your precious Ms. Smaith, won't you?' 'That's a library book!' Martrace cried. 'It does not belong to me! I must return it to Ms. Smaith!'

With that, he dropped the now empty covers of the book into the basket and marched out of the room, leaving the telly blaring.

Most children in Martrace's place would have burst into floods of tears. She did not do this. She sat there very still, white, and thoughtful. She seemed to know that neither crying nor sulking ever got anyone anywhere. The only sensible thing to do when you are attacked

is, as Jace once said, to counterattack. The strategy that was now beginning to hatch in her mind depended, however, upon whether Edward's parrot was as good a talker as Edward made out.

Edward was a friend of Martrace's. Martrace's wonderfully subtle mind was already at work devising, hitherto another suitable chastisement for the deadly parent.

He was a small boy of six who lived just around the corner from her, and for days he had been going on about this great talking parrot his father had given him.

So, the following afternoon, as soon as Ms. Dicksnoter had departed in her car for another session of bingo, Martrace set out for Edward's house to investigate. She knocked on his door and asked if he would be kind enough to show her the famous bird. Edward was delighted and led her up to his bedroom where a truly magnificent blue and yellow parrot sat in a tall cage. 'There it is,' Edward said. 'Its name is Chopper.'

'Make it talk,' Martrace said.

'You can't make it talk,' Edward said. 'You must be patient.'

It will talk when it feels like it.'

They hung around, waiting. Suddenly the parrot said. 'Hullo, hullo, hullo- you- hooo.' It was exactly like a human voice.

Martrace said. 'That's amazing! What else can it say?'

'Rattle my bones!' the parrot said, giving a wonderful imitation of a spooky voice. 'Commotion my bones!' 'He's always saying that,' Edward told her.

'What else can he say?' Martrace asked.

'It's fabulous,' Martrace said. 'Will you lend him to me just for one night?' That was different. Edward thought about it for a few seconds. 'All right, then,' he said. 'If you promise to return him tomorrow.' 'That's about it,' Edward said. 'But it is pretty amazing don't you think?'

'Nopper- I don't,' Edward said. 'Surely not so-o.'

'I'll give you all my next week's pocket-money,' Martrace said.

Martrace staggered back to her own empty house carrying the tall cage in both hands. There was a large fireplace in the dining room, and she now set about wedging the cage up the chimney and out of sight. This was not so easy, but she managed it in the end.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo!’ the bird called down to her. ‘Hullo. hullo!’

‘Shut up, you nut!’ Martrace said, and she went out to wash the soot off her hands. ‘Harry!’ cried the mother, turning white. ‘There’s someone in the house! I heard a voice!’ The father-the mother, that evening while. The brother and Martrace were having supper as usual in the living room in front of the television, a voice- a whisper came loud and clear from the dining room across the hall. ‘Hullo. hullo. hullo- yoooo hooo.’ it said.

‘So, did I!’ the brother said. Martrace jumped up and switched off the telly. ‘They are.’ the father said, sitting tight.

‘Then go and catch them. Harry!’ hissed the mother. ‘Go out and collar them red-handed!’

‘Sh-hh!’ she said. ‘Pay attention!’ They all stopped eating and sat there very tense, listening.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo!’ came the voice again.

‘There it is!’ cried the brother.

‘It’s burglars!’ hissed the mother. ‘They’re in the dining room!’

The father did not move. He seemed in no hurry to dash off and be a hero. His face had turned grey.

‘Get on with it!’ hissed the mother. ‘They’re probably after the silver!’

The husband wiped his lips nervously with his napkin.

‘Why don’t we all go and look together?’ he said.

‘Come on, then.’ the brother said. ‘Come on, mum.’

‘They’re definitely in the dining-room.’ Martrace whispered.

‘I’m sure they are.’

The mother grabbed a poker from the fireplace. The father took a golf club that was standing in the corner. The brother seized a table lamp, ripping the plug out of its socket. Martrace took the knife she had been eating with, and all four of them crept towards the dining-room door, the father keeping well behind the others.

‘Hullo. hullo. hullo.’ came the voice again.

‘Come on!’ Martrace cried and she burst into the room.

Brandishing her knife. ‘Stick ‘em up!’ she yelled. ‘We’ve caught you!’ The others followed her, waving their weapons. Then they stopped. They stared around the room. There was no one there.

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‘There’s no one here.’ the father said, relieved.

‘I heard him. Harry!’ the mother shrieked, still quaking. ‘I distinctly heard his voice! So, did you!’

‘It’s a ghost.’ Martrace said.

‘Heaven helps us!’ cried the mother, clutching her husband round her neck.

‘I’m certain I heard him!’ Martrace cried. ‘He’s in here somewhere!’ She began searching behind the sofa and behind the curtains.

Then came the voice once again, soft and spooky this time.

‘Rattle my bones.’ it said. ‘Rattle my bones.’

They all jumped, including Martrace who was a good actor. They stared around the room. There was still no one there.

‘I know it’s a ghost!’ Martrace said. ‘I have heard it here before!’

This room is haunted! I thought you knew that.’

‘Save us!’ the mother screamed, almost throttling her husband. ‘Did it behave itself?’ Edward asked her.

‘We had a lovely time with it.’ Martrace said. Small eager faces looked up and listened. ‘My parents adored it s0-0.’ ‘I’m getting out of here.’ the father said, greyer than ever now. They all fled, slamming the door behind them. The next afternoon.

Martrace managed to get a sooty and grumpy parrot down from the chimney, and out of the house without being seen. She carried it through the back door and ran with it to Edward's house. In the middle of the first week of Martrace's first term, Miss. Darling said to the class. 'I have some important news for you.

So, listen carefully. 'A word of warning to you all.' Miss. Darling said. 'The Headmistress is extremely strict about everything. Make sure your clothes are clean. Your faces are clean, and your hands are clean.

Express or that mean talk- dumb asses- only when spoken to. When did she ask you a question? stand up at once before you answer it.

Never argue with her. Never answer back. Never try to be funny. If you do, you will make her angry.

And when the Headmistress gets angry you had better watch out.' You are too. Martrace. Put that book down for a moment and pay attention.' Miss. Darling went on. 'It is the Headmistress's custom...'

'To take over the class for one period each week. She does this with every class in the school, and each class has a fixed day and a fixed time. Ours is always at two o'clock on Monday afternoons, proximately after lunch. So tomorrow at two o'clock Miss. Mcfarts will be taking over from me for one lesson. I intend to be here as well, of course, but only as a silent witness. Is that understood?' 'You can say that again.' Dasey murmured.

Nevertheless, the new game she had invented of punishing one or both each time they were beastly to her made her life bearable.

Being exceedingly small and incredibly young. The only power Martrace had over anyone in her family was brainpower. For sheer cleverness, she could run rings around them all. But the fact remained that any five-year-old girl in any family was always obliged to do as she was told, however asinine the orders might be.

Thus, she was always forced to eat her evening meals out of MOVIE-dinner-trays in front of the dreaded box. The flicker of the projector...

She always had to stay alone on weekday afternoons, and whenever she was told to shut up. She had to shut up.

Her safety-valve, the thing that prevented her from going around the bend. Was it the fun of devising and dishing out these splendid punishments?

...And the lovely thing was that they seemed to work, at any rate for short periods. The father became less overconfident and unbearable for several days after receiving a dose of Martrace's magic medicine.

'Yes. Miss. Darling,' they chirruped. 'I am quite sure.' Miss. Darling said. 'That she will be testing you on what you are meant to have learned this week, which is your two-timing table. So, I strongly advise you to rub it up when you get home tonight. Get your mother or father to hear you on it.' 'Spelling,' Miss. Darling said. 'What else will she test us on?' Somebody asked... 'Try to hark back to everything you have learned these last few days. And one more thing. A jug of water and glass must always be on the table here when the Headmistress comes in. She never takes a lesson without that. Now, who will be responsible for seeing that it is there?'

'I will,' Dasey said at once. 'Very well. Dasey,' Miss. Darling said. 'It will be your job to go to the kitchen and get the jug, fill it with water, and put it on the table here with a clean empty glass just before the lesson starts.'

Arithmetic Martrace longed for her parents to be good and loving and understanding and honorable and intelligent. The fact that they were none of these things was something she had to put up with. It was not easy to do so.

The parrot-in-the-chimney affair quite definitely cooled both parents down a lot and for over a week they were comparatively civil to their small daughter. But alas. This could not last. The next flare-up came one evening in the sitting room. Mr. Dicksnoter had just returned from work. Martrace and her brother were sitting quietly on the sofa waiting for their mother to bring in the MOVIE dinners on a tray.

The television had not yet been switched on.

In came Mr. Dicksnoter in a loud checked suit and a yellow tie. The appalling broad orange-and-green check of the jacket and trousers almost blinded the onlooker.

He looked like a low-grade bookmaker dressed up for his daughter's wedding, and he was incredibly pleased with himself this evening. He sat down in an armchair and rubbed his hands together and addressed his son in a loud voice. 'Well, my boy,' he said.

‘Your fathers had a most successful day. He is a lot richer tonight than he was this morning. He has sold no less than five cars. each one at a tidy profit. Sawdust in the gearboxes. the electric drill on the speedometer cables. a splash of paint here and there and a few other clever little tricks and the idiots were all falling over themselves to buy.’

He fished a bit of paper from his pocket and studied it.

‘Listen to the boy.’ he said. addressing the son and ignoring Martrace. ‘Seeing as you will be going into this business with me one day. You must know how to add up the profits you make at the end of each day. Get yourself a pad and a pencil and let us see how clever you are.’

The son obediently left the room and returned with the writing materials.

‘Write down these figures.’ the father said. reading from his bit of paper. ‘Car number one was bought by me for two hundred and seventy-eight pounds and sold for one thousand four hundred and twenty-five. Got that?’

The ten-year-old boy wrote the two separate amounts down slowly and carefully.

‘Car number two.’ the father went on. ‘Cost me one hundred and eighteen pounds and sold for seven hundred and sixty. Got it?’

‘Yes. dad.’ the son said. ‘I’ve got that.’

‘Car number three cost one hundred and eleven pounds and sold for nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.’

‘Say that again.’ the son said. ‘How much did it sell for?’

‘Nine hundred and ninety-nine pounds and fifty pence.’ the father said. ‘And that. by the way. is another of my nifty little tricks to diddle the customer. Never ask for a big round figure. Always go just below it. Never say one thousand pounds. Always say nine hundred and ninety-nine fifty. It sounds much less but it does not. Clever. isn’t it?’

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‘Very.’ the son said. ‘You’re brilliant. dad.’

‘Car number four cost eighty-six pounds - a real wreck that was - and sold for six hundred and ninety-nine pounds fifty.’

‘Not too fast.’ the son said. writing the numbers down.

‘Right. I have it.’

‘Car number five cost six hundred and thirty-seven pounds and sold for sixteen hundred and forty-nine fifty. You got all those figures written down. son?’

‘Yes. daddy.’ the boy said. crouching over his pad and carefully writing.

‘Very well.’ the father said. ‘Now work out the profit I made on each of the five cars and add up the total. Then you will be able to tell me how much money your brilliant father made altogether today.’

‘That's a lot of sums.’ the boy said.

‘Of course, it's a lot of sums.’ the father answered. ‘But when you are in a big business like I am. You must be hot stuff at arithmetic. I have practically got a computer inside my head. It took me less than ten minutes to work the whole thing out.’

‘You mean you did it in your head. dad?’ the son asked. goggling.

‘Well. not exactly.’ the father said. ‘Nobody could do that. But it did not take me long. When you are finished. Tell me what you think my profit was for the day. I have the final total written down here and I will tell you if you are right.’

Martrace said quietly. ‘Dad. you made exactly four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence altogether.’

‘Don't butt in.’ the father said. ‘Your brother and I are busy with high finance.’

‘But dad.’

‘Shut up.’ the father said. ‘Stop guessing and trying to be clever.’

‘Look at your answer. dad.’ Martrace said gently. ‘If you have done it right it ought to be four thousand three hundred and three pounds and fifty pence. Is that what you have? dad?’

The father glanced down at the paper in his hand. He seemed to stiffen. He became incredibly quiet. There was silence.

Then he said. 'Say that again.'

'Four thousand three hundred and three pounds fifty.' Martrace said.

There was another silence. The father's face was beginning to go dark red.

'I'm sure it's right.' Martrace said.

'You, you little cheat!' the father suddenly shouted, pointing at her with his finger. 'You looked at my bit of paper! You read it off from what I have written here!'

'Daddy. I am on the other side of the room.' Martrace said.

'How could I possibly see it?'

'Don't give me that rubbish!' the father shouted. 'Of course, you looked! You must have looked! No one in the world could give the right answer just like that, especially a girl! You are a little cheat, madam. That is what you are! A cheat and a liar!'

At that point. The mother came in carrying a large tray on which were the four suppers. This time it was fish and chips which Ms. Dicksnoter had picked up in the fish and chip shop on her way home from bingo. Bingo afternoons left her so exhausted both physically and emotionally that she never had enough energy left to cook an evening meal. So, if it was not MOVIE dinners it had to be fish and chips. 'What are you looking so red in the face about, Harry?' she said as she put the tray down on the coffee table.

'Your daughter's a cheat and a liar,' the father said, taking his plate of fish and placing it on his knees. 'Turn the telly on and let us not have any more talk.'

The Platinum-Blond Man Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before, but Martrace's parents.

Who wasn't overly concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher, the boss, The supreme commander of this establishment was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class, where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling, and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile. But there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift of being adored by every small child in her care. She understood the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

Miss. Mcfarts, the Headmistress. Was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror, a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened the life out of the pupils and teachers alike. There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. She always marched like a stormtrooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could hear her snorting as she went, and if a group of children happened to be in her path.

She plowed right on through them like a tank, with small people bouncing off her to left and right. Thank goodness we do not meet many people like her in this world, although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do, You should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away. This woman, in all her eccentricities and her appearance, is almost impossible to describe, but I intend to make some attempts to do so a little later. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each pupil.

‘You have all brought your pencils. I hope.’ She spoke.

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ they chanted.

‘Good. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through. And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall were. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me, for your good, tell you something about Miss. Mcfarts. She insists on strict discipline throughout the school. And if you take my advice, you will do your absolute best to behave in her presence. Never argue with her. Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side Miss. Mcfarts can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It is nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school.

Have you got the message?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

‘I.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class. That is because I know it will make things easier for you later. For example. By the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year, I hope you will know all the multiplication tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?’ Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. ‘Wonderful.’ she said. ‘Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.’ Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve out of twenty-four, she did not stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen out of twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.’

‘Stop!’ Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital. and now she said. ‘How far can you go?’

‘How far?’ Martrace said. ‘Well. I do not know. Miss. Darling. For quite a long way. I think.’

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. ‘You mean.’ she said. ‘That you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘What is it?’

‘Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.’

‘What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?’

‘I think so. yes.’ Martrace said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why yes. Miss. Darling. I am sure.’

‘What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?’

‘Nine hundred and seventy-four.’ Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke, she kept her voice level. ‘That is splendid.’ she said. ‘But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?’

‘I think so. Miss. Darling. I do.’

‘Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?’

‘I- I don't quite know.’ Martrace said. ‘I don't know what you mean.’

‘What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘And the four-times?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘Well. How many do you know? Martrace? Do you know up to the twelve-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘What are twelve sevens?’

‘Eighty-four.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old before, or indeed a ten-year-old, who could multiply with such a facility?

‘I hope the rest of you are listening to this.’ she said to the class. ‘Martrace is an incredibly lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to play lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace, who taught you?’

‘No. Miss. Darling. it was not.’

‘You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.’

‘No. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘My father did not teach me.’

‘You mean you taught yourself?’

‘I don't quite know.’ Martrace said truthfully. ‘It's just that I don't find it exceedingly difficult to multiply one number by another.’

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. ‘You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Could you try to explain that a little bit?’

‘Oh, dear.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm not sure.’

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent, all listening.

‘For instance.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No, that is too difficult.’

‘It's two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. ‘What did you say it was?’ she said. looking up.

‘Two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil, removed her spectacles, and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet, watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

‘Now tell me, Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said, still polishing. ‘Try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You must work it out in some way, but you seem able to arrive at the answer instantly. Take the one you have just done, fourteen multiplied by nineteen.’

‘I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.’ Martrace said. ‘I am afraid I do not know how else to explain it. I have always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?’

‘Why not indeed.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The human brain is an amazing thing.’

‘I think it's a lot better than a lump of metal.’ Martrace said.

‘That's all a calculator is.’

‘How right you are.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.’ Miss. Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain, and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonder does pop up in the world from time to time, but only once or twice in a hundred years. All. Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and looking at what happened to him.

‘It's not fair.’ Dasey said. ‘How can she do it and we can't?’

‘Don't worry, Dasey, you will soon catch up.’ Miss. Darling said, lying through her teeth.

At this point Miss. Darling could not resist the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class, but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

‘Well,’ she said, pretending to address the whole class. ‘Let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.’

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey, a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. ‘Spell cat. Tom.’

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. ‘I wonder,’ she said. ‘Whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?’

‘I have.’ Tom said.

‘So have I.’ Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult, and she knew that there were precious few five-year-olds around who would be able to manage it.

‘Can you tell me what that says? Tom?’ she asked.

‘That’s too hard.’ Tom said.

‘Dasey?’

‘The first word is I.’ Dasey said.

‘Can any of you read the whole sentence?’ Miss. Darling asked, waiting for the ‘yes’ that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

‘Yes.’ Martrace said.

‘Go ahead.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

‘That is particularly good indeed.’ Miss. Darling said, making the understatement of her life. ‘How much can you read.

Martrace?’

‘I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said.

‘Although I’m afraid I can’t always understand the meanings.’

14

Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room, but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace’s desk. ‘This is a book of humorous poetry.’ she said. ‘See if you can read that one aloud.’

Smoothly, without a pause and at a nice speed, Martrace began to read:

‘An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a large mouse in his stew.

cried the waiter. ‘Don’t shout...

And wave it about

Or the rest will be wanting one too.’

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you know what an epicure is?

Martrace?’

‘It is dainty with his eating.’ Martrace said.

‘That is correct.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And do you happen to know what that poetry is called?’

‘It’s called ilmenite.’ Martrace said. ‘That’s a lovely one.

It is so funny.’

‘It’s a famous one.’ Miss. Darling said, picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. ‘A witty ilmenite is

extremely hard to write.' she added. 'They look easy, but they most certainly are not.'

'I know.' Martrace said. 'I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.'

'You have. have you?' Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. 'Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear about one of these elements you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?'

'Well.' Martrace said. hesitating. 'I have been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we have been sitting here.'

'About me!' Miss. Darling cried. 'Well. We have certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?'

'I do not think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.'

'Please tell it.' Miss. Darling said. 'I promise I won't mind.'

'I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I must use your first name to make things rhyme and that is why I do not want to say it.'

'How do you know my first name?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.'

Martrace said. 'She called you Jenny.'

'I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.' Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. 'Stand up and recite it.'

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

'The thing we all ask about Jenny Is. 'Surely there cannot be many young girls in the place with so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!' 'The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

‘Why. Thank you. Martrace.’ she said. still smiling.
‘Although it is not true. It is a particularly good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.’

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. ‘It is good. I like it.’

‘It's true as well.’ a small boy called Graceie said.

‘Of course, it's true.’ Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling. although yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

‘Who taught you to read. Martrace?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I just taught me. Miss. Darling.’

‘And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?’

‘I have read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.’

‘And did you like them?’

‘I liked some of them very much indeed.’ Martrace said.

‘But I thought others were fairly dull.’

‘Tell me one that you liked.’

‘I liked The Lion. the Witch and the Wardrobe.’ Martrace said. ‘Mr. C. S. Lewis is a particularly good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.’

‘You are right there.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.’

Martrace said.

‘Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I do.’ Martrace said. ‘Children are not so serious as grown-ups, and they love to laugh.’

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She spoke. 'And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?'

'I am reading other books.' Martrace said. 'I borrowed them from the library. Ms. Smaith is exceedingly kind to me. She helps me to choose them.'

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her worktable and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. 'What other books?' she murmured.

'I am very fond of Charles Dickens.' Martrace said. 'He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.'

At that moment, the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class.

There was no doubt in Martrace's mind that this latest display of foulness by her father deserved severe punishment. and as she sat eating her awful fried fish and fried chips and ignoring the television. her brain went to work on various possibilities.

By the time she went up to bed, her mind was made up.

The next morning, she got up early and went into the bathroom, and locked the door. As we already know. Ms. Dicksnoter's hair was dyed a brilliant platinum blond-haired person. very much the same glistening silvery color as a female tightrope walker's tights in a circus. The big dyeing job was done twice a year at the hairdressers. but every month or so in between. Ms. Dicksnoter used to freshen it up by giving it a rinse in the washbasin with something called PLATINUM BLONDE HAIRDYE EXTRA STRONG. This also served to dye the nasty brown hairs that kept growing from the root's underneath. The bottle of PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA STRONG was kept in the cupboard in the bathroom. and underneath the title on the label were written the words Caution. This is peroxide. Keep away from children. Martrace had read it many times with fascination. Martrace's father had a fine crop of black hair which he parted in the middle and of which he was exceedingly proud. 'Good strong hair.' he was fond of saying. 'Means there's a good strong brain underneath.'

'Like Shakespeare.' Martrace had once said to him.

'Like whom?'

'Shakespeare. daddy.'

‘Was he brainy?’

‘Very. daddy.’

‘He had masses of hair. did he?’

‘He was bald. daddy.’

To which the father had snapped. ‘If you can't talk sense then shut up.’

Anyway. Mr. Dicksnoter kept his hair looking bright and strong. or so he thought. by rubbing into it every morning copious quantities of a lotion called OIL OF VIOLETS HAIR TONIC. A bottle of this smelly purple mixture always stood on the shelf above the sink in the bathroom alongside all the toothbrushes. and a very vigorous scalp massage with OIL OF VIOLETS took place daily after shaving was completed. This hair and scalp massage was always. accompanied by loud masculine grunts and heavy breathing and gasps of ‘Ah-hh. That is better! That is the stuff! Rub it right into the roots!’ which could be heard by Martrace in her bedroom across the corridor.

Now. in the early morning privacy of the bathroom. Martrace unscrewed the cap of her father's oil of violets and tipped three-quarters of the contents down the drain. Then she filled the bottled up with her mother's PLATINUM BLONDE HAIR-DYE EXTRA

STRONG. She carefully left enough of her father's original hair tonic in the bottle so that when she gave it a good shake the whole thing still looked purple. She then replaced the bottle on the shelf above the sink. taking care to put her mother's bottle back in the cupboard.

So far so good.

At breakfast time Martrace sat quietly at the dining-room table eating her cornflakes. Her brother sat opposite her with his back to the door devouring hunks of bread smothered with a mixture of peanut butter and strawberry jam. The mother was just out of sight around the corner in the kitchen making Mr. Dicksnoter's breakfast which always had to be two fried eggs on fried bread with three pork sausages and three strips of bacon and some fried tomatoes.

At this point, Mr. Dicksnoter came noisily into the room. He was incapable of entering any room quietly. especially at breakfast time. He always had to make his appearance felt immediately by creating a lot of noise and clatter. One could almost hear him saying. ‘It is me! Here I come. the great man himself. the expert in the house. the

wage-earner. the one who makes it possible for all the rest of you to live so well!

Notice me and pay your respects!’

On this occasion, he strode in and slapped his son on the back and shouted. ‘Well, my boy. Your father feels he is in for another great money-making day today at the garage! I have a few little beauties. I am going to flog to the idiots this morning. Where is my breakfast?’

‘It is coming. treasure.’ Ms. Dicksnoter called from the kitchen.

Martrace kept her face bent low over her cornflakes. She did not dare look up. In the first place, she was not at all sure what she was going to see. And secondly. if she did see what she thought she was going to see. she would not trust herself to keep a straight face. The son was looking directly ahead out of the window stuffing himself with bread and peanut butter and strawberry jam.

The father was just moving round to sit at the head of the table when the mother came sweeping out of the kitchen carrying a huge plate piled high with eggs, sausages, bacon, and tomatoes. She looked up. She caught sight of her husband. She stopped dead. Then she let out a scream that lifted her right up into the air and she dropped the plate with a crash and a splash onto the floor. Everyone jumped. including Mr. Dicksnoter.

‘What is the matter with you. woman?’ he shouted.

‘Look at the mess you've made on the carpet!’

‘Your hair!’ the mother was shrieking. pointing a quivering finger at her husband. ‘Look at your hair! What’ve you had done to your hair?’

‘What's wrong with my hair for heaven's sake?’ he said.

‘Oh, my Gawd dad. what’ve you had done to your hair?’ the son shouted.

A splendid noisy scene was building up nicely in the breakfast room.

Martrace said nothing. She simply sat there admiring the wonderful effect of her handiwork. Mr. Dicksnoter's fine crop of black

hair was now a dirty silver. the color this time of a tightrope walker's tights that had not been washed for the entire circus season.

‘You’ve. you’ve. you have dyed it!’ shrieked the mother. ‘Why did you do it. you fool! It looks frightful! It looks horrendous! You look like a freak!’

‘What the blazes are you all talking about?’ the father yelled. putting both hands to his hair. ‘I most certainly have not dyed it! What do you mean by dyed it? What has happened to it? Or is this some sort of a stupid joke?’ His face was turning pale green. the color of sour apples.

‘You must have dyed it. dad.’ the son said. ‘It’s the same color as mum’s only much dirtier looking.’

‘Of course, he’s dyed it!’ the mother cried. ‘It cannot change color all by itself! What were you trying to do? make yourself look handsome or something? You look like someone’s grandmother gone wrong!’

‘Get me a mirror!’ the father yelled. ‘Don’t just stand there shrieking at me! Get me a mirror!’

The mother’s handbag lay on a chair at the other end of the table. She opened the bag and got out a powder compact that had a small round mirror on the inside of the lid. She opened the compact and handed it to her husband. He grabbed it and held it before his face and in doing so spilled most of the powder all over the front of his fancy tweed jacket.

‘Be careful!’ shrieked the mother. ‘Now look what you have done! That is my best Elizabeth Arden face powder!’

‘Oh, my Gawd!’ yelled the father. staring into the little mirror. ‘What’s happened to me! I look terrible! I look just like you went wrong! I cannot go down to the garage and sell cars like this! How did it happen?’ He stared around the room. first at the mother. then at the son. then at Martrace. ‘How could it have happened?’ he yelled.

‘I imagine. daddy.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘That you weren’t looking extremely hard, and you simply took mummy’s bottle of hair stuff off the shelf instead of your own.’

‘Of course, that’s what happened!’ the mother cried. ‘Well, really Harry. How stupid can you get? Why did you not read the label before you started splashing the stuff all over you! Mine is strong. I am

only meant to use one tablespoon of it in a whole basin of water and you have gone and put it all over your head neat! It will take all your hair off in the end! Is your scalp beginning to burn? Dear?’

‘You mean I’m going to lose all my hair?’ the husband yelled.

‘I think you will.’ the mother said. ‘Peroxide is an immensely powerful chemical. It is what they put down the lavatory to disinfect the pan only they give it another name.’

‘What are you saying!’ the husband cried. ‘I am not a lavatory pan! I do not want to be disinfected!’

‘Even diluted as I use it.’ the mother told him. ‘It makes a good deal of my hair fall out. So, goodness knows what is going to happen to you. I am surprised it did not take the whole of the top of your head off!’

‘What intend to I do?’ wailed the father. ‘Tell me quick what to do before it starts falling out!’

Martrace said. ‘I would give it a good wash. dad. If I were you. with soap and water. But you will have to hurry.’

‘Will that change the color back?’ the father asked anxiously.

‘Of course, it will not. you tweet.’ the mother said.

‘Then what do I do? I cannot go around looking like this forever?’

‘You’ll have to have it dyed black.’ the mother said. ‘But wash it first or there won’t be any there to die.’

‘Right!’ the father shouted. springing into action. ‘Get me an appointment with your hairdresser this instant for a hair-dying job! Tell them it is an emergency! They must boot someone else off their list! I am going upstairs to wash it now!’ With that, the man dashed out of the room and Ms. Dicksnoter. sighing deeply. went to the telephone to call the beauty parlor.

‘He does do some silly things now and again. doesn’t he? mummy?’ Martrace said.

The mother, dialing the number on the phone, said, 'I am afraid men are not always quite as clever as they think they are. You will learn that when you get a bit older, my girl.'

Miss. Darling

Martrace was a little late in starting school. Most children begin Primary School at five or even just before, but Martrace's parents.

Who wasn't overly concerned one way or the other about their daughter's education? I had forgotten to make the proper arrangements in advance. She was five and a half when she entered the school for the first time.

The village school for younger children was a bleak brick building called Crunchem Hall Primary School. It had about two hundred and fifty pupils aged from five to just under twelve years old. The headteacher, the boss, The supreme commander of this establishment was a formidable middle-aged lady whose name was Miss. Mcfarts.

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Naturally, Martrace was put in the bottom class, where there were eighteen other small boys and girls about the same age as her. Their teacher was called Miss. Darling, and she could not have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four. She had a lovely pale oval Madonna face with blue eyes and her hair was light brown. Her body was so slim and fragile one got the feeling that if she fell over, she would smash into a thousand pieces, like a porcelain figure.

Miss. Jennifer Darling was a mild and quiet person who never raised her voice and was seldom seen to smile. But there is no doubt she possessed that rare gift of being adored by every small child in her care.

She understood the bewilderment and fear that so often overwhelms young children who for the first time in their lives are herded into a classroom and told to obey orders.

Some curious warmth that was almost tangible shone out of Miss. Darling's face when she spoke to a confused and homesick newcomer to the class.

There was an aura of menace about her even at a distance, and when she came up close you could almost feel the dangerous heat radiating from her as from a red-hot rod of metal. Miss. Mcfarts, the

Headmistress. was something else altogether. She was a gigantic holy terror.

a fierce tyrannical monster who frightened life out of the pupils and teachers alike. When she marched - Miss. Mcfarts never walked. She always marched like a stormtrooper with long strides and arms swinging - when she marched along a corridor you could hear her snorting as she went. and if a group of children happened to be in her path. she plowed right on through them like a tank. with small people bouncing off her to left and right. This woman. in all her eccentricities and her appearance.

It is almost impossible to designate. but I intend to make some attempts to do so a little later. Let us leave her for the moment and go back to Martrace and her first day in Miss. Darling's class.

After the usual business of going through all the names of the children. Miss. Darling handed out a brand-new exercise book to each scholar. Thank goodness- we do not meet many people like her in this world. although they do exist and all of us are likely to come across at least one of them in a lifetime. If you ever do. You should behave as you would if you met an enraged rhinoceros out in the bush - climb up the nearest tree and stay there until it has gone away.

'You have all brought your pencils. I hope.' she said. Now, this is the very first day of school for each one of you. It is the beginning of at least eleven long years of schooling that all of you are going to have to go through.

And six of those years will be spent right here at Crunchem Hall were. as you know. your Headmistress is Miss. Mcfarts. Let me, for your good, tell you something about Miss. Mcfarts.

'Yes. Miss. Darling.' they chanted.

'Good. She insists on strict discipline throughout the school. And if you take my advice, you will do your absolute best to behave in her presence. Never argue with her.

Never answer her back. Always do as she says. If you get on the wrong side Miss. Mcfarts can liquidize you like a carrot in a kitchen blender. It is nothing to laugh about. Dasey. Take that grin off your face. All of you will be wise to remember that Miss. Mcfarts deals very- very- severely with anyone who gets out of line in this school. Have you got the message?'

‘Certainly. Miss. Darling.’ chirruped eighteen eager little voices.

‘I.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘I want to help you to learn as much as possible while you are in this class.

That is because I know it will make things easier for you later. For example. By the end of this week, I intend to expect every one of you to know the two-times table by heart. And in a year, yours truly hopes’ you will know- this all the reproduction tables up to twelve. It will help you enormously if you do. Now then. do any of you happen to have learned the two-times table already?’ Martrace put up her hand. She was the only one.

Miss. Darling looked carefully at the tiny girl with dark hair and a round serious face sitting in the second row. ‘Wonderful.’ she said. ‘Please stand up and recite as much of it as you can.’ Martrace stood up and began to say the two-times table.

When she got to twice twelve out of twenty-four, she did not stop.

She went right on with twice thirteen out of twenty-six. twice fourteen is twenty-eight. twice fifteen is thirty. twice sixteen is.’

‘How far?’ Martrace said. ‘Well. I do not know. Miss.

Darling. For quite a long way. I think.’ ‘Stop!’ Miss. Darling said. She had been listening slightly spellbound to this smooth recital. and now she said. ‘How far can you go?’

Miss. Darling took a few moments to let this curious statement sink in. ‘You mean.’ she said. ‘That you could tell me what two times twenty-eight is?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘What is it?’

‘Fifty-six. Miss. Darling.’

‘What about something much harder. like two times four hundred and eighty-seven? Could you tell me that?’

‘I think so. yes.’ Martrace said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Why yes. Miss. Darling. I am sure.’

‘What is it then. two times four hundred and eighty-seven?’

‘Nine hundred and seventy-four.’ Martrace said immediately. She spoke quietly and politely and without any sign of showing off.

Miss. Darling gazed at Martrace with absolute amazement. but when next she spoke; she kept her voice level. ‘That is splendid.’ she said. ‘But of course, multiplying by two is a lot easier than some of the bigger numbers. What about the other multiplication tables? Do you know any of those?’

‘I think so. Miss. Darling. I do.’

‘Which ones. Martrace? How far have you got?’

‘I. I don’t quite know.’ Martrace said. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘What I mean is do you, for instance, know the three-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’

‘And the four-times?’

‘Well. How many do you know? Martrace? Do you know up to the twelve-times table?’

‘Yes. Miss. Darling.’ ‘What are twelve sevens?’

‘Eighty-four.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling paused and leaned back in her chair behind the plain table that stood in the middle of the floor in front of the class. She was shaken by this exchange but took care not to show it. She had never come across a five-year-old before. or indeed a ten-year-old. who could multiply with such a facility?

‘I hope the rest of you are listening to this.’ she said to the class. ‘Martrace is an incredibly lucky girl. She has wonderful parents who have already taught her to play lots of numbers. Was it your mother? Martrace. who taught you?’

‘No. Miss. Darling. it was not.’

‘You must have a great father then. He must be a brilliant teacher.’

‘No. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said quietly. ‘My father did not teach me.’

‘You mean you taught yourself?’

‘I don't quite know.’ Martrace said truthfully. ‘It's just that I don't find it exceedingly difficult to multiply one number by another.’

Miss. Darling took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked again at the small girl with bright eyes standing beside her desk so sensible and solemn. ‘You say you don't find it difficult to multiply one number by another.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Could you try to explain that a little bit?’

‘Oh, dear.’ Martrace said. ‘I'm not sure.’

Miss. Darling waited. The class was silent. all listening.

‘Two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling put down her pencil, removed her spectacles, and began to polish the lenses with a piece of tissue. The class remained quiet, watching her and waiting for what was coming next. Martrace was still standing up beside her desk.

‘For instance.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If I asked you to multiply fourteen by nineteen. No. that is too difficult.’

‘It's two hundred and sixty-six.’ Martrace said softly.

Miss. Darling stared at her. Then she picked up a pencil and quickly worked out the sum on a piece of paper. ‘What did you say it was?’ she said, looking up.

‘I. I. I simply put the fourteen down in my head and multiply it by nineteen.’ Martrace said. ‘I am afraid I do not know how else to explain it. I have always said to myself that if a little pocket calculator can do it why shouldn't I?’

‘Now tell me. Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said, still polishing. ‘Try to tell me exactly what goes on inside your head when you get a multiplication like that to do. You must work it out in some way. but you seem able to arrive at the answer instantly. Take the one you have just done. fourteen multiplied by nineteen.’

‘Why not indeed.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The human brain is an amazing thing.’

‘I think it’s a lot better than a lump of metal.’ Martrace said.

‘That’s all a calculator is.’

‘How right you are yen.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Pocket calculators are not allowed in this school anyway.’ Miss. At this point Miss. Darling could not resist the temptation of exploring still further the mind of this astonishing child. She knew that she ought to be paying some attention to the rest of the class, but she was altogether too excited to let the matter rest.

Darling was feeling quite quivery. There was no doubt in her mind that she had met a truly extraordinary mathematical brain. and words like child-genius and prodigy went flitting through her head. She knew that this sort of wonder does pop up in the world from time to time. but only once or twice in a hundred years.

~*~

Mozart was only five when he started composing for the piano and looking at what happened to him.

‘It’s not fair.’ Dasey said. ‘How can she do it and we can’t?’

‘Don’t worry. Dasey. you will soon catch up.’ Miss. Darling said. lying through her teeth.

‘Well.’ she said. pretending to address the whole class. ‘Let us leave sums for the moment and see if any of you have begun to learn to spell. Hands up anyone who can spell cat.’

Three hands went up. They belonged to Dasey. a small boy called Tom and to Martrace. ‘Spell cat. Tom.’

Tom spelled it.

Miss. Darling now decided to ask a question that normally she would not have dreamed of asking the class on its first day. ‘I wonder.’ she said. ‘Whether any of you three who know how to spell cat has learned how to read a whole group of words when they are strung together in a sentence?’

‘I have.’ Tom said.

‘So have I.’ Dasey said.

Miss. Darling went to the blackboard and wrote with her white chalk the sentence. I have already begun to learn how to read long sentences. She had purposely made it difficult, and she knew that there were precious few five-year-olds around who would be able to manage it.

‘Can you tell me what that says? Tom?’ she asked.

‘That’s too hard.’ Tom said.

‘Dasey?’

‘The first word is- I.’ Dasey said.

‘Can any of you read the whole sentence?’ Miss. Darling asked, waiting for the ‘yes’ that she felt certain was going to come from Martrace.

‘Certainly.’ Martrace said.

‘Go ahead.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace read the sentence without any hesitation at all.

‘That is particularly good indeed.’ Miss. Darling said, making the understatement of her life. ‘How much can you read.

Martrace?’

‘I think I can read most things. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said.

‘Although I’m afraid I can’t always understand the meanings.’

Miss. Darling got to her feet and walked smartly out of the room, but was back in thirty seconds carrying a thick book.

She opened it at random and placed it on Martrace’s desk. ‘This is a book of humorous poetry.’ she said. ‘See if you can read that one aloud.’

Smoothly, without a pause and at a nice speed. Martrace began to read:

‘An epicure dining at Crewe-

Found a large mouse in his stew.

cried the waiter. 'Don't shout

And wave it about or the rest will be wanting one too.'

Then Martrace- rips off-It happened in Physics. reading a Library art book under the desk. I turned a page and fell for an older man. and anonymous at that.

hardly ideal - he was four hundred and forty-five.

I was fourteen.

'Eureka!' streaked each thought (I prayed no-one would hear) and Paradise all term was page 179 (I prayed no-one would guess). Of course-

my fingers. sticky with toffee and bliss. failed to entice him from his century; his cool hoary stare fastened me firmly in mine. I got six overdues.

suspension of borrowing rights- and a D in Physics.

But had by heart what Archimedes proves.

Ten years later I married:

A European with cool grey eyes.

...A mustache.

...Pigskin gloves.

Several children saw the funny side of the rhyme and laughed. Miss. Darling said. 'Do you know what an epicure is? Martrace?'

'It is dainty with his eating.' Martrace said.

'That is correct.' Miss. Darling said. 'And do you happen to know what that poetry is called?'

'It's called ilmenite.' Martrace said. 'That's a lovely one.

...It is so funny.'

'It's a famous one.' Miss. Darling said. picking up the book and returning to her table in front of the class. 'A witty ilmenite is

extremely hard to write.' she added. 'They look easy, but they most certainly are not.'

'I know.' Martrace said. 'I've tried quite a few times but mine are never any good.'

'You have. have you?' Miss. Darling said. more startled than ever. 'Well, Martrace. I would very much like to hear about one of these elements you say you have written. Could you try to remember one for us?'

'Well.' Martrace said. hesitating. 'I have been trying to make up one about you. Miss. Darling. while we have been sitting here.'

'About me!' Miss. Darling cried. 'Well. We have certainly got to hear that one. haven't we?'

'I do not think I want to say it. Miss. Darling.'

'Please tell it.' Miss. Darling said. 'I promise I won't mind.'

'I think you will. Miss. Darling. because I must use your first name to make things rhyme and that is why I do not want to say it.'

'How do you know my first name?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I heard another teacher calling you by it just before we came in.'

Martrace said. 'She called you Jenny.'

'I insist upon hearing this ilmenite.' Miss. Darling said. smiling one of her rare smiles. 'Stand up and recite it.'

Reluctantly Martrace stood up and very slowly. very nervously. she recited her ilmenite:

'The thing we all ask about Jenny

Is. 'Surely there cannot be many

Young girls in the place

With so lovely a face?'

The answer to that is. 'Not any!' 'Then she ripped off-faster-

I want to be a passenger in your car again and shut my eyes while you sit at the wheel. awake and assured in your private world. seeing all the lines on the road ahead, down a long stretch of empty highway without any other face's insight.

I want to be a passenger in your car again and put my life back in your hands.

The whole of Miss. Darling's pale and pleasant face blushed a brilliant scarlet. Then once again she smiled. It was a much broader one this time. a smile of pure pleasure.

'Why. Thank you. Martrace.' she said. still smiling. 'Although it is not true. It is a particularly good ilmenite. Oh, dear. oh, dear. I must try to remember that one.'

From the third row of desks. Dasey said. 'It is good. I like it.'

'It's true as well.' a small boy called Graceie said.

'Of course, it's true.' Tom said.

Already the whole class had begun to warm towards Miss. Darling. although yet she had hardly taken any notice of any of them except Martrace.

'Who taught you to read. Martrace?' Miss. Darling asked.

'I just taught me. Miss. Darling.'

'And have you read any books all by yourself. any children's books. I mean?'

'I have read all the ones that are in the public library in Love Street. Miss. Darling.'

'And did you like them?'

'I liked some of them very much indeed.' Martrace said.

'But I thought others were fairly dull.'

'Tell me one that you liked.'

‘I liked The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.’ Martrace said. ‘Mr. C. S. Lewis is a particularly good writer. But he has one failing. There are no funny bits in his books.’

‘You are right there.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘There aren't many funny bits in Mr. Tolkien either.’

Martrace said.

‘Do you think that all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘I do.’ Martrace said. ‘Children are not so serious as grown-ups, and they love to laugh.’

Miss. Darling was astounded by the wisdom of this tiny girl. She spoke. ‘And what are you going to do now that you've read all the children's books?’

‘I am reading other books.’ Martrace said. ‘I borrowed them from the library. Ms. Smaith is exceedingly kind to me. She helps me to choose them.’

Miss. Darling was leaning far forward over her worktable and gazing in wonder at the child. She had completely forgotten now about the rest of the class. ‘What other books?’ she murmured.

‘I am very fond of Charles Dickens.’ Martrace said. ‘He makes me laugh a lot. Especially Mr. Pickwick.’

At that moment, the bell in the corridor sounded for the end of class. Immediately after lunch. She dashed off to the kitchen and found one of Mcfarts's famous jugs. It was a large bulging thing made of blue-glazed pottery. Dasey filled it half-full of water and carried it, together with glass, into the classroom and set it on the teacher's table. The classroom was still empty. Quick as a flash. Dasey got her pencil-box from her satchel and slid open the lid just a tiny bit. The newt was lying quite still. With great care. She held the box over the neck of the jug and pulled the lid fully open and tipped the newt in. There was a plop as it landed in the water. then it thrashed around wildly for a few seconds before settling down. And now, to make the newt feel more at home. Dasey decided to give it all the pondweed from the pencil-box as well. Then she read- on Time is a rhyme- just another nickel and dime- no more wasted time... that one I love... Love is not something you can buy it is only earned. What is love and In-love she asked- Stop taking you piss-head- you do not know what love and fu*king is... do you... then you are not that smart, are you...? Don't you think this girl

has my story... in why she asked the teacher...? Um- she looked at her like not now...

The deed was done. Everything was ready. Dasey put her pencils back into the damp pencil box and returned it to its correct place on her desk. Then she went out and joined the others in the playground until it was time for the lesson to begin.

The Mcfarts in the interval. Miss. Darling left the classroom and headed straight for the Headmistress's study. She felt wildly excited. She had just met a small girl who possessed it, or so it seemed to her, quite extraordinary qualities of brilliance. There had not been time yet to find out exactly how brilliant the child was, but Miss. Darling had learned enough to realize that something had to be done about it as soon as possible. It would be ridiculous to leave a childlike that stuck in the bottom form.

Normally Miss. Darling was terrified of the Headmistress and kept far away from her. But at this moment she felt ready to take on anybody. She knocked on the door of the dreaded private study.

'Enter!' boomed the deep and dangerous voice of Miss. Mcfarts. Miss. Darling went in.

Now, most headteachers are chosen because they possess several fine qualities. They understand children and they have the children's best interests at heart. They are sympathetic. They are fair and they are deeply interested in education. Miss. Mcfarts possessed none of these qualities and how she ever got her present job was a mystery.

She was above all the most formidable female. She had once been a famous athlete, and even now the muscles were still clearly in evidence. Looking at her, you got the feeling that this was someone who could bend iron bars and tear telephone directories in half. You could see them in the bull-neck, on the big shoulders, in thick arms, in the sinewy wrists and the commanding legs. Her face, I am afraid, was neither a thing of beauty nor a joy forever?

She had an obstinate chin, a cruel mouth and small arrogant eyes. And as for her clothes. The massive thighs which emerged from out of the smock were encased in a pair of extraordinary breeches, bottle-green in color and made of coarse twill... they were, to say the least, extremely odd. She always had a brown cotton smock which was pinched in around the waist with a wide leather belt. The belt was fastened in front with an enormous silver buckle. These breeches reached just below the knees and from there on down she

sported green stockings with turn-up tops. which displayed her calf muscles to perfection?

On her feet, she wore flat-heeled brown brogues with leather flaps. She looked, in short, more like an eccentric and bloodthirsty follower of the staghounds than the principal of a nice school for children.

When Miss. Darling entered the study, Miss. Mcfarts was standing beside her huge desk with a look of scowling impatience on her face. 'Yes, Miss. Darling,' she said. 'What is it you want? You are looking very flushed and flustered this morning. What is the matter with you? Have those little stinkers been flicking spitballs at you?'

'No. Headmistress. Nothing like that.'

'Well. What is it then? Get on with it. I am a busy woman.' As she spoke, she reached out and poured herself a glass of water from a jug that was always on her desk.

'There is a little girl in my class called Martrace Dicksnoter.' Miss. Darling began.

A terrific bargain. Yes. I liked Dicksnoter. A real pillar of our civilization. 'That's the daughter of the man who owns Dicksnoter Motors in the village.' Miss. Mcfarts barked. She hardly ever spoke in a normal voice. She either barked or shouted. 'An excellent person. Dicksnoter,' she went on. 'I was in there only days gone by. He sold me a car, a 1919 Bens. Almost new only make on the one door. Only done five thousand miles. The former owner was an old lady who took it out once a year at the most. He told me the daughter was a bad lot though. He said to watch her. He asked if anything bad ever happened in the school. It was certain to be his daughter who did it. I have not met the little brat yet, but she will know about it when I do. Her father said she is a real wart.' 'Oh no. Headmistress. that cannot be right!' Miss. Darling howled.

Nasty little worm. I will be bound. 'Oh yes. Miss. Darling. its darn well is right! In fact. Now I have come to think of it. I will bet it was she who put that stink-bomb under my desk here first thing this morning. The place stank like a sewer! Of course, it was her! I intend to have her for that. You see if I do not! What does she look like? I have discovered. Miss. Darling. During my lengthy career as a teacher that a bad girl is a far more dangerous creature than a bad boy. What is more. They are much harder to squash. Squashing a bad girl is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing is not there.

Nasty dirty things. little girls are. Glad I never was one.'

'Oh. but you must have been a little girl once.

Principal. Surely you were.'

'But Headmistress. the child only arrived at school this morning and came straight to the classroom.'

'Thank you for suggesting it. Do not argue with me. for heaven's sake. woman! This little brute Martrace or whatever her name is has stink-bombed my study! There is no doubt about it!'

'Not for long anyway.' Miss. Mcfarts barked. grinning.

'I became a woman very quickly.'

She is completely off her rocker. Miss. Darling told herself. She is as barmy as a bedbug. Miss. Darling stood resolutely before the Headmistress. For once she was not going to be browbeaten. 'I must tell you. Principal.' she said. 'That you are completely mistaken about Martrace putting a stink bomb under your desk.'

'I am never mistaken. Miss. Darling!'

'But I did not suggest it. Principal.'

'Of course, you did! Now, what do you want? Miss. Darling?

Why are you wasting my time?'

'No. no!' Miss. Darling cried out. 'Martrace is a genius.'

At the mention of this word. Miss. Mcfarts's face turned purple and her whole body seemed to swell up like a bullfrog's. 'A genius!' she shouted.

The Headmistress... I have extraordinary things to report about the child. May I please tell you what happened in class just now?'

'What piffle is this you are talking about. madam? You must be out of your mind! I have her father's word for it that the child is a gangster!'

'I came to you to talk about Martrace I suppose she set fire to your skirt and scorched your knickers!' Miss. Mcfarts snorted.

‘Her father is wrong. Principal.’

‘Don’t be a twerp. Miss. Darling! You have met the little beast for only half an hour and her father has known her all her life!’

But Miss. Darling was determined to have her say and she now began to describe some of the amazing things Martrace had done with arithmetic.

‘So, she is learned a few tables by heart. has she?’ Miss. Mcfarts barked. ‘My dear woman. that does not make her a genius! It makes her a parrot!’ ‘But Headmistress she can read.’

‘So, can I.’ Miss. Mcfarts snapped.

‘It is my opinion.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That Martrace should be taken out of my form and placed directly in the top form with the eleven-year-olds.’

‘Ha ha ha!’ snorted Miss. Mcfarts. ‘So, you want to get rid of her. Do you? So, you cannot handle her? So now you want to unload her on to the wretched Miss. Plimsoll at the top from where she will cause even more chaos?’

‘No. no!’ cried Miss. Darling. ‘That is not my reason at all!’

‘Oh. yes, it is!’ shouted Miss. Mcfarts. ‘I can see right through your little plot. madam! And my answer is no! Martrace stays where she is, and it is up to you to see that she behaves herself.’ Miss. Darling stood there helpless before this great, red-necked giant. There was a lot more she would have liked to have said but she knew it was useless. she said softly. ‘Very well. then. It is up to you.

Principal.’ ‘But- but- but Headmistress. please.’ ‘You’re darn right it’s up to me!’ Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. ‘And do not forget.

Madam, we are dealing here with a little viper who put a stink bomb under my desk.’

‘She did not do that. Principal!’

-Great Scott. I know it is heavy- I am not having a little five-year-old brigand sitting with the senior girls and boys in the top form.

Whoever heard of such a thing!’ ‘Not another word!’ shouted Miss. Mcfarts. ‘And in any case. I have a rule in this school that all youngsters remain in their age groups regardless of ability.

‘Of course, she did it.’ Miss. Mcfarts boomed. ‘And I will tell you what. I wish to heaven I was still allowed to use the birch and belt as I did in the good old days! I would have roasted Martrace's bottom for her so she could not sit down for a month!’

Miss. Darling turned and walked out of the study feeling depressed but by no means defeated. I am going to do something about this child. she told herself. I do not know what it will be like. but I intend to find a way to help her in the end.

16

The Parents

‘There is no point.’ she said. ‘If you are sitting in class doing nothing while I am teaching the rest of the form the two times table and how to spell cat, rat, and mouse. So, during each lesson, I intend to give you one of these textbooks to study. At the end of the lesson, you can come up to me with your questions if you have any and I intend to try to help you. How does that sound?’

When Miss. Darling emerged from the Headmistress's study.

most of the children were outside on the playground. Her first move was to go around to the various teachers who taught the senior class and borrow many textbooks from them.

Algebra books, geometry. French. English Literature and the like. Then she sought out Martrace and called her into the classroom.

‘Thank you. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That sounds fine.’

‘I am sure.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That we will be able to get you moved into a much higher form later. but for the moment the

Principal wishes you to stay where you are.’

‘Very well. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘Thank you so much for getting those books for me.’

What a nice child she is. Miss. Darling thought. I do not care what her father said about her. She seems incredibly quiet and gentle to me. And not a bit stuck up despite her brilliance.

She hardly seems aware of it.

So, when the class reassembled. Martrace went to her desk and began to study a textbook on geometry which Miss. Darling had given her. The teacher kept half an eye on her all the time and noticed that the child very soon became deeply absorbed in the book. She never glanced up once during the entire lesson.

Miss. Darling, meanwhile, was making another decision. She decided that she would go herself and have a secret talk with Martrace's mother and father as soon as possible. She simply refused to let the matter rest where it was. The whole thing was ridiculous.

She could not believe that the parents were unaware of their daughter's remarkable talents. All. Mr. Dicksnoter was a successful motor-car dealer, so she presumed that he was an intelligent man himself. In any event, parents never underestimated the abilities of their children. Plus. Now Miss. Darling's hopes began to expand even further. She started wondering whether permission might not be sought from her parents for her to give private tuition to Martrace after school. Quite the reverse.

Sometimes it was unbearable for a teacher to convince the proud father or mother that their beloved offspring was a complete nitwit. Miss. Darling felt confident that she would have no difficulty in convincing Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that Martrace was something incredibly special indeed. The trouble was going to be to stop them from getting over-wholehearted.

She would be late, between nine and ten o'clock, when Martrace was sure to be in bed. The prospect of coaching a child as bright as this appealed enormously to her professional instinct as a teacher. And suddenly she decided that she would go and call on Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter that very evening.

And that is precisely what she did. Having the address from the school records. Miss. Darling set out to walk from her own home to the Dicksnoter's house shortly after nine. She found the house in a pleasant street where each smallish building was separated from its neighbors by a bit of garden. It was a modern brick house that could not have been cheap to buy and the name on the gate said COSY NOOK.

Nosey cook might have been better. Miss. Darling thought. She was given to playing with words in that way. She walked up the

path and rang the bell. And while she stood waiting, she could hear the television blaring inside.

‘I’m not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And please forgive me for butting in on you like this. I am Martrace’s teacher at the school and I must have a word with you and your wife.’

‘Got into trouble already, has she?’ Mr. Dicksnoter said, blocking the doorway. ‘Well. She is your responsibility from now on. You will have to deal with her.’

The door was opened by a small ratty-looking man with a thin ratty mustache who was wearing a sports-coat that had an orange and red stripe in the material. ‘Yes?’ he said, peering out at Miss.

Darling. ‘If you’re selling raffle tickets, I don’t want any.’

‘Miss. Darling said- She is in no trouble at all...’ ‘I have come with good news about her. Fairly startling news. Mr. Dicksnoter. Do you think- I may come in for a few minutes and talk to you about

Martrace?’

‘We are right in the middle of watching one of our favorite programs.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘This is the most inconvenient. Why don’t you come back some other time?’

That shook Mr. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling began to lose patience. ‘Mr. Dicksnoter,’ she said. ‘If you think some rotten MOVIE programmed is more important than your daughter’s future. then you ought not to be a parent! Why don’t you switch the darn thing off and listen to me!’

He was not used to being spoken to in this way. He peered carefully at the slim frail woman who stood so resolutely out on the porch. ‘Oh, very well then.’ he snapped. ‘Come on in and let us get it over with.’ Miss. Darling stepped briskly inside.

‘Ms. Dicksnoter isn’t going to thank you for this.’ the man said as he led her into the sitting-room where a large platinum-blond woman was gazing rapturously at the MOVIE screen.

‘Who is it?’ the woman said, not looking around.

‘Some schoolteachers.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘She says she’s got to talk to us about Martrace.’ He crossed to the MOVIE set and turned down the sound but left the picture on the screen.

‘Don't do that. Harry!’ Ms. Dicksnoter cried out. ‘Willard is just about to propose to Angelica!’

‘You can still watch it while we're talking.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘This is Martrace's teacher. She says she has some sort of news to give us.’

‘My name is Jennifer Darling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘How do you do. Ms. Dicksnoter.’

Ms. Dicksnoter glared at her and spoke. ‘What's the trouble then?’

Nobody invited Miss. Darling to sit down so she chose a chair and sat down anyway. ‘This.’ she said. ‘Was your daughter's first day at school.’

‘We know that.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ratty about Missing her program. ‘Is that all you came to tell us?’

Miss. Darling stared hard into the other woman's wet grey eyes. and she allowed the silence to hang in the air until Ms. Dicksnoter became uncomfortable. ‘Do you wish me to explain why I came?’ she said.

‘Get on with it then.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said.

‘I'm sure you know.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That children in the bottom class at school are not expected to be able to read or spell or juggle with numbers when they first arrive. Five-year-old cannot do that. But Martrace can do it all. And if I am to believe her.’

‘Teach her what?’ Mr. Dicksnoter said.

‘To read. To read books.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You did teach her. She was lying. You have shelves full of books all over the house. I would not know.

You are both great readers.’

‘I wouldn't.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. She was still ratty at losing the sound on the MOVIE.

‘Was she lying? Then?’ Miss. Darling said. ‘When she told me that nobody taught her to multiply or to read? Did either of you teach her?’

‘Of course, we read.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘Don’t be so daft. I read the motoring- new and steam power and the Motor from cover to cover every week.’

‘This child has already read a surprising number of books.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was simply trying to find out if she came from a family that loved good literature.’

‘We don’t hold with book-reading.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. ‘You cannot make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading storybooks. We do not keep them in the house.’

‘I see.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Well. All I came to tell you was that Martrace has a brilliant mind. But I expect you knew that already.’

‘Of course, I knew she could read.’ the mother said. ‘She spends her life up in her room buried in some silly book.’

‘But does it not intrigue you.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That a little five-year-old child is reading long adult novels by Dickens and Hemingway? Doesn’t that make you jump up and down with excitement?’

‘Not particularly.’ the mother said. ‘I am not in favor of bluestocking girls. A girl should think about making herself look attractive so she can get a good husband later. Looks are more important than books. Miss. Hunky.’

‘The name is Darling.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Now look at me.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘Then look at you. You choose books. I chose looks.’

Miss. Darling looked at the plain plump person with the smug suet-pudding face who was sitting across the room.

‘What did you say?’ she asked.

‘I said you chose books, and I chose looks.’ Ms. Dicksnoter said. ‘And who is finished the better off? Me. of course. I am sitting pretty in a nice house with a successful businessperson, and you are left slaving away teaching a lot of nasty little children the ABC.’

‘Quite right. sugar plum.’ Mr. Dicksnoter said. casting a look of such simpering sloppiness at his wife would have made a cat sick.

Miss. Darling decided that if she was going to get anywhere with these people, she must not lose her temper. 'I haven't told you all of it yet.' she said. 'Martrace. as far as I can gather at this early stage. I am also a mathematical genius. She can multiply complicated figures in her head like lightning.'

'What's the point of that when you can buy a calculator?' Mr. Dicksnoter said.

'A girl doesn't get a man by being brainy.' Ms. Dicksnoter said.

'Look at that film-star for instance.' she added. pointing at the silent MOVIE screen where a bosomy female was being embraced by a craggy actor in the moonlight. 'You do not think she got him to do that by multiplying figures at him. Do you? Not likely. And now he is going to marry her. you see if he does not. and she is going to live in a mansion with a butler and lots of house cleaners.'

Miss. Darling could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had heard that parents like this existed all over the place and that their children turned out to be delinquents and dropouts. but it was still a shock to meet a pair of them in the flesh.

'Martrace's trouble.' she said. trying once again. 'Is that she is so far ahead of everyone else around her that it might be worth thinking about some extra private tuition. I seriously believe that she could be brought up to university standard in two or three years with the proper coaching.'

'University?' Mr. Dicksnoter shouted. bouncing up in his chair. 'Who wants to go to university for heaven's sake! All they learn there are unhealthy habits!'

'That is not true.' Miss. Darling said. 'If you had a heart attack this minute and had to call a doctor. that the doctor would be a university graduate. If you get sued for selling someone a rotten second-hand car. You would have to become a lawyer and he would be a university graduate. too. Do not despise clever people. Mr. Dicksnoter. But I can see we are not going to agree. I am sorry I burst in on you like this.' Miss. Darling rose from her chair and walked out of the room.

Mr. Dicksnoter followed her to the front door and spoke.

'Good of you to come. Miss. Hawkes. or is it Miss. Harris?'

‘It's neither.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But let it go.’ And away she went.

17

Throwing the Hammer

‘Have you met the Mcfarts yet?’ Hortensia asked.

‘We've seen her at prayers.’ Dasey said. ‘But we haven't met her.’

‘You've got a treat coming to you.’ Hortensia said. ‘She hates exceedingly small children. She, therefore, loathes the bottom class and everyone in it. She thinks five-year-olds are grubs that have not yet hatched out.’

In went another fistful of crisps and then she spoke again. out sprayed the crumbs. ‘If you survive your first year you may just manage to live through the rest of your time here. But many do not survive. They get carried out on stretchers screaming. I have seen it often.’ Hortensia paused to observe the effect these remarks were having on the two twitchy ones. Not very much. They seemed cool. So, the large one decided to regale them with further information.

‘I suppose you know the Mcfarts has a lockup cupboard in her private quarters called The Closet? Have you heard about the closet?’

Martrace and Dasey shook their heads and continued to gaze up at the giant. Being exceedingly small. They have inclined to mistrust any creature that was larger than they were. especially senior girls.

‘The Closet.’ Hortensia went on. ‘Is a very tall but very narrow cupboard. The floor is only ten inches square so you cannot sit down or squat in it.

You must stand naked.

And three of the walls are made of cement with bits of broken glass sticking out all over. So, you cannot lean against them.

You must stand at attention all the time when you get locked up in there. It is terrible.’

‘Can't you lean against the door?’ Martrace asked.

‘Don't be daft.’ Hortensia said. ‘The door's got thousands of sharp spikey nails sticking out of it. They have been hammered through from the outside. by the Mcfarts herself.’

‘Have you ever been in there?’ Dasey asked.

‘The first term I was in there six times.’ Hortensia said.

‘Twice for an entire day and the other times for two hours each. But two hours is quite bad enough. It is pitch- dark and you must stand up dead straight and if you wobble at all you get spiked either by the glass on the walls or the nails on the door.

‘Why were you put in?’ Martrace asked. ‘What had you done?’

‘The first time.’ Hortensia said. ‘I poured half a tin of Golden Syrup onto the seat of the chair the Mcfarts were going to sit on at prayers. It was wonderful. When did she lower herself into the chair? There was a loud squelching noise like that made by a hippopotamus when lowering its foot into the mud on the banks of the Pompeii River. But you are too small and stupid to have read the Just So Stories. aren't you?’

‘I've read them.’ Martrace said.

‘You're a liar.’ Hortensia said amiably. ‘You cannot even read yet. But no matter. So, when the Mcfarts sat down on the Golden Syrup. The squelch was beautiful. And then she jumped up again. The chair stuck to the seat of those awful green breeches she wears and produced her for a few seconds until the thick syrup slowly came unstuck. Then she clasped her hands to the seat of her breeches and both hands got covered in the muck. You should have heard her bellow.’

‘But how did she know it was you?’ Dasey asked.

‘A little squirt called Ollie Bog-whistle sneaked on me.’

Hortensia said. ‘I knocked his front teeth out.’

‘And the Mcfarts put you in The Closet for a complete day?’ Martrace asked. gulping.

‘All day long.’ Hortensia said. ‘I was off my rocker when she let me out. I was babbling like an idiot.’

‘What were the other things you did to get put in The Closet?’ Dasey asked.

‘Oh, I can’t remember them all now.’ Hortensia said. She spoke with the air of an old warrior who had been in so many battles that bravery had become commonplace. ‘It’s all so long ago.’ she added, stuffing more crisps into her mouth. ‘Ah yes. I can remember one. Here is what happened. I chose a time when I knew the Mcfarts were out of the way of teaching the sixth former, and I put up my hand and asked to go to the bogs. But instead of going there, I sneaked into the Mcfarts’s room. And after a speedy search, I found the drawer where she kept all her gym knickers.’

‘Go on.’ Martrace said, spellbound. ‘What happened next?’

‘I had sent away by post, you see, for this enormously powerful itching powder.’ Hortensia said. ‘It cost 50p for a packet and was called The Skin-Scorcher. The label said it was made from the powdered teeth of deadly snakes, and it was guaranteed to raise wells the size of walnuts on your skin. So, I sprinkled this stuff inside every pair of knickers in the drawer and then folded them all up again carefully.’ Hortensia paused to cram more crisps into her mouth.

‘Did it work?’ Dasey asked. The pleasant thing about Martrace was that if you had met her casually and talked to her you would have thought she was a perfectly normal five-and-a-half-year-old child. She displayed almost no outward signs of her brilliance and she never showed off. ‘This is a very sensible and quiet little girl,’ you would have said to yourself. And unless for some reason you had started a discussion with her about literature or mathematics, you would never have known the extent of her brainpower.

It was therefore easy for Martrace to make friends with other children. All those in her class liked her.

They knew of course that she was ‘clever,’ because they had heard her being questioned by Miss. Darling on the first day of term.

And they knew also that she was allowed to sit quietly with a book during lessons and not pay attention to the teacher.

But children of their age do not search deeply for reasons. They are far too wrapped up in their small struggles to worry overmuch about what others are doing and why.

Before the first week of term was up, awesome tales about the Headmistress, Miss. Mcfarts, began to filter through to the newcomers. Martrace and Dasey, standing in a corner of the playground during morning-break on the third day, were approached by a rugged ten-year-old with a boil on her nose... called Hortensia.

‘New scum. I suppose.’ Hortensia said to them, looking down from her great height. She was eating from an extra-large bag of potato crisps and digging the stuff out in handfuls. ‘Welcome to bursal.’ she added, spraying bits of crisp out of her mouth like snowflakes.

The two tiny ones, confronted by this giant, kept a watchful silence.

‘Well.’ Hortensia said. ‘A few days later, during prayers, the Mcfarts suddenly started scratching herself like mad down below. Aha. I said to myself. Here we go. She has changed to a gym already. It was wonderful to be sitting there watching it all and knowing that I was the only person in the whole school who realized exactly what was going on inside the Mcfarts’s pants. And I felt safe, too. I knew I could not be caught. Then the scratching got worse.

She could not stop. She must have thought she had a wasp’s nest down there. And then, right in the middle of the Lord’s Prayer, she leaped up and grabbed her bottom and rushed out of the room.’ Among Martrace’s new-found friends was the girl called Dasey. Right from the first day of term the two of them started wandering around together during the morning break and in the lunch hour. Dasey was exceptionally small for her age, a skinny little nymph with deep-brown eyes and with dark hair that was cut in a fringe across her forehead. Martrace liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous.

She liked Martrace for the same reasons. Both Martrace and Dasey were enthralled. It was quite clear to them that they were at this moment standing in the presence of a master. Here was somebody who had brought the art of skullduggery to the highest point of perfection, somebody, moreover, who was willing to risk life and limb in pursuit of her calling? They gazed in wonder at this goddess, and suddenly even the boil on her nose was no longer a blemish but a badge of courage.

‘But how did she catch you at that time?’ Dasey asked, breathless with wonder.

‘She didn’t.’ Hortensia said. ‘But I got a day in The Closet just the same.’

‘Why?’ They both asked.

‘The Mcfarts.’ Hortensia said. ‘Has a nasty habit of guessing. When she does not know who the culprit is, she guesses it. and the trouble is she is often right. I was the prime suspect this time because of the Golden Syrup job. and although I knew she did not have any proof, nothing I said made any difference. I kept shouting. ‘How could I have done it? Miss. Mcfarts? I did not even know you kept any spare knickers at school! I do not even know what itching powder is! I have never heard of it!’ But the lying did not help me despite the exceptional performance I put on. The Mcfarts simply grabbed me by one ear and rushed me to The Closet at the double and threw me inside and locked the door. That was my second all-day stretch. It was absolute torture. I was spiked and cut all over when I came out.’

‘It’s like a war.’ Martrace said. overawed.

‘You’re darn right it’s like a war.’ Hortensia cried. ‘And the casualties are terrific. We are the crusaders. the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the

Mcfarts is the Prince of Darkness. The Foul Serpent. the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command. It is a tough life. We all try to support each other.’

‘You can rely on us.’ Dasey said. making her height of three feet two inches stretch as tall as possible.

‘No. I can’t.’ Hortensia said. ‘You’re only shrimp. But you never know. We may find a use for you one day in some undercover job.’

‘Tell us just a little bit more about what she does.’
Martrace said. ‘Please do.’

‘I mustn’t frighten you before you’ve been here a week.’
Hortensia said.

‘You won’t.’ Dasey said. ‘We may be small but we’re quite tough.’

‘Listen to this then.’ Hortensia said. ‘Only yesterday the Mcfarts caught a boy called Julius Rottwinkle eating Liquorice Allsorts during the scripture lesson and she simply picked him up by one arm and flung him clear out of the open classroom window. Our classroom is one floor up and we saw Julius Rottwinkle go sailing out over the garden like a Frisbee and landing with a thump in the middle of the

lettuce. Then the Mcfarts turned to us and spoke. 'From now on, anybody caught eating in class goes straight out the window.'

'Did this Julius Rottwinkle break any bones?' Dasey asked.

'Only a few.' Hortensia said. 'You've got to remember that the Mcfarts once threw the hammer for Britain in the Olympics so she's immensely proud of her right arm.'

'What's throwing the hammer?' Dasey asked.

'The hammer...'

Hortensia said. 'Is a ruddy great cannonball on the end of a long bit of wire. and the thrower whisks it round and round his or her head faster and faster and then lets it go. You must be terrifically strong.'

The Mcfarts will throw anything around just to keep her arm in. especially children.'

'Good heavens.' Dasey said.

'I once heard her say.' Hortensia went on. 'That a large boy is about the same weight as an Olympic hammer and therefore he's especially useful for practicing with.'

At that point, something strange happened. The playground, which up to then had been filled with shrieks and the shouting of children at play, all at once became silent as the grave. 'Watch out.'

Hortensia whispered. Martrace and Dasey glanced around and saw the gigantic figure of Miss. Mcfarts advancing through the crowd of children with menacing strides.

The children drew back hastily to let her through and her progress across the asphalt was like that of Moses going through the Red Sea when the waters parted.

A formidable figure she was too, in her belted smock and green breeches. Below the knees, her calf muscles stood out like grapefruits inside her stockings. 'Amanda Lynn Kayly!' she was shouting. 'You. Amanda Lynn comes here!'

'Hold your hats.' Hortensia whispered.

‘What’s going to happen?’ Dasey whispered back.

‘That idiot Amanda.’ Hortensia said. ‘Has let her long hair grow even longer during the weeks and her mother has plaited it into pigtails. Silly thing to do.’

‘Why silly?’ Martrace asked.

‘If there’s one thing the Mcfarts can’t stand its pigtails.’ Hortensia said.

Martrace and Dasey saw the giant in green breeches advancing upon a girl of about ten who had a pair of plaited golden pigtails hanging over her shoulders. Each pigtail had a blue satin bow at the end of it and it all looked very pretty. The girl was wearing pigtails. Amanda Lynn. stood quite still. watching the advancing giant. and the expression on her face was one that you might find on the face of a person who is trapped in a small field with an enraged bull that is charging flat-out towards her.

The girl was glued to the spot. terror-struck. pop eyed. quivering. knowing for certain that the Day of Judgment had come for her at last.

Miss. Mcfarts had now reached the victim and stood towering over her. ‘I want those filthy pigtails off before you come back to school tomorrow!’ she barked. ‘Chop ‘em off and throw ‘em in the dustbin. you understand?’

Amanda. paralyzed with fright. managed to stutter. ‘My mummy likes them. She p-p-plaits them for me every morning.’

‘Your mummy’s a twit!’ the Mcfarts bellowed. She pointed a finger the size of salami at the child’s head and shouted. ‘You look like a rat with a tail coming out of its head!’

‘My m-m-mummy thinks I look lovely. Miss. T-T-Mcfarts.’ Amanda stuttered. shaking like a blancmange.

‘I don’t give a tinker’s toot what your mummy thinks!’ the Mcfarts yelled. and with that, she lunged forward and grabbed hold of Amanda’s pigtails in her right fist, and lifted the girl clear off the ground. Then she started swinging her round and round her head. faster and faster and Amanda was screaming blue murder and the

Mcfarts was yelling. ‘I will... give you pigtails. You little rat!’

‘Shades of the Olympics.’ Hortensia murmured. ‘She’s getting up speed now just like she does with the hammer. Ten to one she is going to throw her.’

And now the Mcfarts was leaning back against the weight of the whirling girl and pivoting expertly on her toes.

spinning round and round. and soon Amanda Lynn was travelling so fast she became a blur. and suddenly. with a mighty grunt. The Mcfarts let go of the pigtails and Amanda went sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky.

‘Well thrown. sir!’ someone shouted from across the playground. ...And Martrace.

-And-

Who was mesmerized by the whole foolish affair? saw Amanda Lynn descending in a long, graceful parabola onto the playing field beyond. She landed on the grass and bounced three times and finally came to rest. Then. amazingly. she sat up. She looked a trifle dazed and who could blame her. But after a minute or so she was on her feet again and tottering back towards the playground.

The Mcfarts stood in the playground dusting off her hands. ‘Not bad.’ she said. ‘Considering I am not in strict training. Not bad at all.’ Then she strode away.

‘She’s mad.’ Hortensia said.

‘But don’t the parents complain?’ Martrace asked.

‘Would yours?’ Hortensia asked. ‘I know mine would not. She treats the mothers and fathers just the same as the children and they are all scared of her. I will see you sometime. you two.’ And with that, she sauntered away.

Dick Longcock and eating out the Cherry pie... ‘How can she get away with it?’ Dasey said to Martrace. ‘Surely the children go home and tell their mothers and fathers. I know my father would raise a terrific stink if I told him the Headmistress had grabbed me by the hair and slung me over the playground fence.’

‘No. he wouldn’t.’ Martrace said. ‘And I will tell you why. He simply would not believe you.’

‘Of course, he would.’

‘He wouldn’t.’ Martrace said. ‘And the reason is obvious. Your story would sound too ridiculous to be believed. And that is the Mcfarts’s great secret.’

‘What is?’ Dasey asked.

Martrace said. ‘Never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog. Make sure everything you do is so completely crazy it is unbelievable. No parent is going to believe this pigtail story. not in a million years. Mine would not. They would call me a liar.’

‘In that case.’ Dasey said. ‘Amanda’s mother isn’t going to cut her pigtails off.’

‘No. she isn’t.’ Martrace said. ‘Amanda will do it herself.

You see if she does not.’

‘Do you think she’s mad?’ Dasey asked.

‘Whom?’

‘The Mcfarts.’

‘No. I don’t think she’s mad.’ Martrace said. ‘But she is extremely dangerous. Being in this school is like being in a cage with a cobra.

You must be amazingly fast on your feet.’

They got another example of how dangerous the Headmistress could be on the very next day. During lunch, an announcement was made that the whole school should go into the Assembly Hall and be seated as soon as the meal was over.

When all the two hundred and fifty or so children were settled down in Assembly. The Mcfarts marched onto the platform. None of the other teachers came in with her. She was carrying a riding-crop in her right hand.

She stood up there on center stage in her lime breeches with legs apart and riding-crop in hand. glaring at the sea of upturned faces before her.

‘What’s going to happen?’ Dasey whispered.

‘I don’t know.’ Martrace whispered back.

The whole school waited for what was coming next.

‘Dick Longcock!’ the Mcfarts barked suddenly.

‘Where is Dick Longcock?’

A hand shot up among the seated children.

‘Come up here!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘And look smart about it!’

‘Stand over there!’ the Mcfarts ordered, pointing. The boy stood to one side. He looked anxious. He knew very well he was not up there to be presented with a prize. He was watching the Headmistress with an exceedingly wary eye, and he kept edging farther and farther away from her with little shuffles of his feet, as a rat might edge away from a terrier that is watching it from across the room. His plump flabby face had turned grey with fearful apprehension. His stockings hung about his ankles.

‘This clot,’ boomed the Headmistress, pointing the riding crop at him like a rapier. ‘This blackhead, this foul carbuncle, this poisonous pustule that you see before you are none other than a disgusting criminal, a denizen of the underworld, a member of the Mafia!’

‘Who, me?’ Dick Longcock said, looking genuinely puzzled.

‘A thief!’ the Mcfarts screamed. ‘A crook! A pirate! A brigand! A rustler!’

‘Steady on,’ the boy said. ‘I mean, dash it all, Principal.’

‘Do you deny it? Your miserable little gumboil? Do you plead not guilty?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ the boy said, more puzzled than ever.

An eleven-year-old boy who was decidedly large and round stood up and waddled briskly forward. He climbed up onto the platform. ‘I will tell you what I am talking about, you are suppurating little blisters!’ The Mcfarts shouted. ‘Yesterday morning, during break. You sneaked like a serpent into the kitchen and stole a slice of my private chocolate Cherry pie from my tea-tray! That tray had just been prepared for me by the cook! It was my morning snack! And as for the Cherry pie.

It was my private stock! That was not a boy's Cherry pie! Don't you think for one minute I am going to eat the filth I gave to you? That Cherry pie was made from real butter and real cream! And he, that robber-bandit, that safe cracker, that highwayman standing over there with his socks around his ankles stole it and ate it!

19

'I never did,' the boy exclaimed, turning from grey to white. 'Don't lie to me. Long cock!' barked the Mcfarts. 'The cook saw you! What is more, she saw you eating it!'

The Mcfarts paused to wipe a fleck of froth from her lips.

When she spoke again her voice was suddenly softer, quieter.

More friendly, and she leaned towards the boy, smiling. 'You like my special chocolate Cherry pie, don't you?

Long cock? It is rich and delicious, isn't it? Long cock?'

'Very good,' the boy mumbled. The words were out before he could stop himself.

'You're right,' the Mcfarts said. 'It is particularly good. Therefore, I think you should congratulate the cook. When a gentleman has had a particularly delicious meal. Longcock. Always sends his compliments to the chef. You did not know that, did you. Long cock? But those who inhabit the criminal underworld are not noted for their good manners.'

The boy remained silent.

'Cook!' the Mcfarts shouted, turning her head towards the door. 'Come here, cook! Long cock wishes to tell you how good your chocolate Cherry pie is!'

The cook, a tall, shriveled female who looked as though all her body-juices had been dried out of her long ago in a hot oven, walked on to the platform wearing a dirty white apron.

Her entrance had been arranged beforehand by the Headmistress.

'Now then, Longcock,' the Mcfarts boomed. 'Tell cook what you think of her chocolate Cherry pie.'

‘Very good.’ the boy mumbled. You could see he was now beginning to wonder what all this was leading up to. The only thing he knew for certain was that the law forbade the Mcfarts to hit him with the riding-crop that she kept smacking against her thigh. That was some comfort. but not much because the Mcfarts were unpredictable. One never knew what she was going to do next.

‘Then get it. And bring a knife to cut it with.’

The cook disappeared. At once, she was back again staggering under the weight of an enormous round chocolate Cherry pie on a China platter. The Cherry pie was fully eighteen inches in diameter, and it was covered with dark-brown chocolate icing.

‘Put it on the table.’ the Mcfarts said.

There was a small table center stage with a chair behind it.

The cook placed the Cherry pie carefully on the table. ‘Sit down.

Longcock.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘Sit there.’

The boy moved cautiously to the table and sat down. He stared at the gigantic Cherry pie.

‘There you are. Longcock.’ the Mcfarts said. and once again her voice became soft. persuasive. even gentle. ‘It is all for you. every bit of it. As you enjoyed that slice you had yesterday so very much. I ordered a cook to bake you an extra-large one all for yourself.’

‘Well. thank you.’ the boy said. Bemused. ‘Thank you. cook.’ the boy said shy- and fat-faced.

‘Thank cook. not me.’ the Mcfarts said.

The cook stood there like a shriveled bootlace. tight-lipped.

Implacable. disapproving. She looked as though her mouth was full of lemon juice.

‘Come on then.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘Why don’t you cut yourself a nice thick slice and try it?’

‘What? Now?’ The boy said. cautious. He knew there was a catch in this somewhere. but he was not sure where. ‘Can’t I take it home instead?’ he asked. ‘There you are. cook.’ the Mcfarts cried.

‘Longcock likes your Cherry pie. He adores your Cherry pie. Do you have any more of your Cherry pie you could give him?’

‘I do indeed.’ the cook said. She seemed to have learned her lines by heart.

‘That would be impolite.’ the Mcfarts said. with a crafty grin. ‘You must show cookie here how grateful you are for all the trouble she’s taken.’

The boy did not move.

‘Go on. get on with it.’ The Mcfarts said. ‘Cut a slice and taste it.

We do not have all day.’

The boy picked up the knife and was about to cut into the Cherry pie when he stopped. He stared at the Cherry pie. Then he looked up at the Mcfarts. then at the tall stringy cook with her lemon-juice mouth.

All the children in the hall were watching tensely. waiting for something to happen. They felt certain it must. The Mcfarts was not a person who would give someone a whole chocolate Cherry pie to eat just out of kindness. Many were guessing that it had been filled with pepper or castor-oil or some other foul-tasting substance that would make the boy violently sick.

It might even be arsenic, and he would be dead in ten seconds flat. Or it was a boobytrapped Cherry pie and the whole thing would blow up the moment it was cut. taking Dick Longcock with it. No one in the school put it past the Mcfarts to do any of these things.

‘I don’t want to eat it.’ the boy said.

‘Taste it. you little brat.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘You’re insulting the cook.’

Very gingerly the boy began to cut a thin slice of the vast Cherry pie. Then he levered the slice out. Then he put down the knife and took the sticky thing in his fingers and started very slowly to eat it.

‘It is good. isn’t it?’ the Mcfarts asked.

‘Very good.’ the boy said. chewing and swallowing. He finished the slice.

‘Have another.’ the Mcfarts said.

‘That's enough. thank you.’ the boy murmured.

‘I said to have another.’ the Mcfarts said. and now there was an altogether sharper edge to her voice. ‘Eat another slice! Do as you are told!’

‘I don't want another slice.’ the boy said.

Suddenly the Mcfarts exploded. ‘Eat!’ she shouted. banging her thigh with the riding-crop. ‘If I tell you to eat. you will eat! You wanted Cherry pie!

You stole Cherry pie! And now you have Cherry pie! What is more. you are going to eat it! You do not leave this platform, and nobody leaves this hall until you have eaten the entire Cherry pie that is sitting there in front of you!

Do I make myself clear? Long cock? Do you get my meaning?’

The boy looked at the Mcfarts. Then he looked down at the enormous Cherry pie.

‘Eat! Eat! Eat -eat it all out!’ the Mcfarts were yelling. Very slowly the boy cut himself another slice and began to eat it.

Martrace was fascinating. ‘Do you think he can do it?’ she whispered to Dasey.

‘No.’ Dasey whispered back. ‘It is impossible. He would be sick before he was halfway through.’

The boy kept going. When he had finished the second slice. He looked at the Mcfarts. hesitating.

‘Eat this bitch out!’ she shouted. ‘Greedy little thieves who like to eat Cherry pie must have Cherry pie! Eat faster boy! Eat faster! We do not want to be here all day! And do not stop like you are doing now! Next time you stop before it is all finished, you will go straight to The Closet, and I intend to lock the door and throw the key down the well!’

The boy cut the third slice and started to eat it. He finished this one quicker than the other two and when that was done, he immediately picked up the knife and cut the next slice. In some peculiar way, he was getting into his stride.

Martrace- watching closely. saw no signs of distress in the boy yet.

If anything. He was gathering confidence as he went along. 'He's doing well.' she whispered to Dasey.

'He'll be sick soon.' Dasey whispered back. 'It's going to be horrid.'

When Dick Longcock had eaten his way through half of the entire enormous Cherry pie. He paused for just a couple of seconds and took several deep breaths.

The Mcfarts stood hands-on-hips. glaring at him. 'Silence!' shouted the Mcfarts.

The boy cuts himself another thick slice and starts eating it fast. There were still no signs of flagging or giving up. He certainly did not look as though he was about to stop and cry out. 'I cannot. I cannot eat anymore! I am going to be sick!' He was still running.

'Get on with it!' she shouted. 'Eat it up!'

Suddenly the boy let out a gigantic belch that rolled around the Assembly Hall like thunder. Many of the audience began to giggle.

And now a subtle change was coming over the two hundred and fifty watching children in the audience. Earlier on, they had sensed impending disaster. They had prepared themselves for an unpleasant scene in which the wretched boy, stuffed to the gills with cherry pie, would have to surrender and beg for mercy and then they would have watched the triumphant Mcfarts forcing increased Cherry pie into the mouth of the breathless boy. Unexpectedly someone shouted.

'Come on Brucie! You can make it! 'Not a bit of it. Dick Longcock was three-quarters of the way through and still going strong. One sensed that he was almost beginning to enjoy himself. He had a mountain to climb, and he was jolly well going to reach the top or die in the attempt. What is more? He had now become very conscious of his audience and of how they were all silently rooting for him. This was nothing less than a battle between him and the mighty Mcfarts.

The Mcfarts wheeled around and yelled. 'Silence!' The audience watched intently. They were thoroughly caught up in the contest. They were longing to start cheering but they did not dare.

'I think he's going to make it.' Martrace whispered.

‘I think so too.’ Dasey whispered back. ‘I wouldn’t have believed anyone in the world could eat the whole of a Cherry pie that size.’

‘The Mcfarts doesn’t believe it either.’ Martrace whispered. ‘Look at her. She is turning redder and redder. She is going to kill him if he wins.’

The boy is slowing down now. There was no doubt about that. But he kept pushing the stuff into his mouth with the dogged perseverance of a long-distance runner who has sighted the finishing-line and knows he must keep going. As the very last mouthful disappeared. A tremendous cheer arose from the audience and children were leaping onto their chairs, yelling, clapping, and shouting. ‘Well done

Brucie! Good for you. Brucie! You have won a gold medal.

Brucie!’

The Mcfarts stood motionless on the platform. Her great horsy face had turned the color of molten lava and her eyes were glittering with fury. She glared at Dick Longcock who was sitting on his chair like some huge, overstuffed grub. replete. comatose. unable to move or to speak. A fine sweat was beading his forehead but there was a grin of triumph on his face.

Suddenly the Mcfarts lunged forward and grabbed the large empty China platter on which the Cherry pie had rested. She raised it high in the air and brought it down with a crash right on the top of the wretched Dick Longcock’s head and pieces flew all over the platform.

The boy was by now so full of Cherry pie he was like a sackful of wet cement, and you could not have hurt him with a sledgehammer. He simply shook his head a few times and went on grinning. ‘Go to blazes!’ screamed the Mcfarts and she marched off the platform followed closely by the cook.

Dasey,

‘What if the jug’s not in the kitchen?’ Dasey asked.

‘There are a dozen Headmistress’s jugs and glasses in the kitchen.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘They are used all over the school.’

‘I won’t forget.’ Dasey said. ‘I promise I won’t.’

Already Dasey's scheming mind was going over the possibilities that this water-jug job had opened for her. She longed to do something truly heroic. She admired the older girl Hortensia to distraction for the daring deeds she had performed in the school. She also admired Martrace who had sworn secrecy to her about the parrot job she had brought off at home, and the great hair-oil switch which had bleached her father's hair. It was her turn now to become a hero if only she could produce a brilliant plot.

On the way home from school that afternoon she began to mull over the various possibilities, and when at last the germ of a brilliant idea hit her. She began to expand on it and laid out her plans with the same care the Duke of Wellington had done before the Battle of Waterloo. Admittedly the enemy on this occasion was not Jace.

But you would never have anyone at Crunchem Hall to admit that the Headmistress was a less formidable foe than the famous

Frenchman. Great skill would have to be exercised, Dasey told herself, and great secrecy observed if she were to come out of this exploit alive.

There was a muddy pond at the bottom of Dasey's garden and this was the home of a colony of newts. The newt, although common in English pounds, is not often seen by ordinary people because it is a shy and murky creature. It is an incredibly ugly gruesome-looking animal, like a baby crocodile but with a shorter head. It is quite harmless but does not look like it. It is about six inches long and very slim, with greenish-grey skin on top and an orange-colored belly underneath. It is, in fact, an amphibian, which can live in or out of the water.

That evening Dasey went to the bottom of the garden determined to catch a newt. They are swiftly moving animals and not easy to get hold of. She lay on the bank for a long time waiting patiently until she spotted a whopper. Then, using her school hat as a net, she swooped and caught it. She had lined her pencil-box with pond-weed ready to receive the creature, but she discovered that it was not easy to get the newt out of the hat and into the pencil-box. It wriggled and squirmed like quicksilver and, apart from that, the box was only just long enough to take it. When she did get it in at last, she had to be careful not to trap its tail in the lid when she slid it closed. A boy next door called Graceie Entwistle had told her that if you chopped off a newt's tail, the tail stayed alive and grew into another newt ten times bigger than the first one. It could be the size of an alligator. Dasey did not believe that, but she was not prepared to risk it happening.

Eventually, she managed to slide the lid of the pencil-box right home and the new washers. Then, on second thoughts. She opened the lid just the tiniest fraction so that the creature could breathe.

The next day she carried her secret weapon to school in her satchel. She was tingling with excitement. She was longing to tell Martrace about her plan for battle. In fact. She wanted to tell the whole class. But she finally decided to tell nobody. It was better that way because then no one, even when put under the most severe torture, would be able to name her as the culprit.

Lunchtime came. Today it was sausages and baked beans. Dasey's favorite. but she could not eat it.

‘Are you feeling all right? Dasey?’ Miss. Darling asked from the head of the table.

‘I had such a huge breakfast.’ Dasey said. ‘I really couldn't eat a thing.’

(The Weekly Test)

At two o'clock sharp the class assembled, including Miss. Darling noted that the jug of water and the glass were in the proper place. Then she took up a position standing right at the back. Everyone waited. Suddenly in marched the gigantic figure of the Headmistress in her belted smock and green breeches.

‘Good afternoon. children.’ she barked.

‘Good afternoon. Miss. Mcfarts.’ they chirruped.

The Headmistress stood before the class. legs apart; hands-on-hips. glaring at the small boys and girls who sat nervously at their desks in front of her.

‘Not a very pretty sight.’ she said. Her expression was one of utter distaste. as though she were looking at something a dog had done in the middle of the floor. ‘What a bunch of nauseating little warts you are.’

Everyone had the sense to stay silent.

‘It makes me vomit.’ she went on. ‘To think that I am going to have to put up with a load of garbage like you in my school for the next six years. I can see that I am going to have to expel as many of you as possible as soon as possible to save myself from going around the bend.’ She paused and snorted several times. It was a curious noise.

You can hear the same sort of thing if you walk through a riding-stable when the horses are being fed. 'I suppose.' she went on. 'Your mothers and fathers tell you-you are wonderful. Well. I am here to tell you the opposite. and you'd better believe me. Stand up, everybody!'

They all got quickly to their feet.

'Now put your hands out in front of you. And as I walk past, I want you to turn them over so I can see if they are clean on both sides.'

The Mcfarts began a slow march along the rows of desks inspecting the hands. All went well until she came to a small boy in the second row. 'What's your name?' she barked.

'Tom.' the boy said.

'Tom what?'

'Tom Hicks.' the boy said.

'Tom Hicks what?' the Mcfarts bellowed. She bellowed so loud she nearly blew the little chap out of the window.

'That's it.' Tom said. 'Unless you want my middle names as well.' He was a brave little fellow and one could see that he was trying not to be scared by the Gorgon who towered above him.

'I do not want your middle names. you blister!' the Gorgon bellowed. 'What is my name?'

'Miss. Mcfarts.' Tom said.

'Then use it when you address me! Now then. Let us try again. What is your name?'

'Tom Hicks. Miss. Mcfarts.' Tom said.

'That's better.' the Mcfarts said. 'Your hands are filthy.

Tom! When did you last wash them?'

'Well. let me think.' Tom said. 'That's difficult to remember exactly. It could have been yesterday, or it could have been the day before.'

The Mcfarts's whole body and face seemed to swell up as though she were being inflated by a bicycle pump.

‘I knew it!’ she bellowed. ‘I knew as soon as I saw you that you were nothing but a piece of filth! What is your father's job? a sewage-worker?’

‘He's a doctor.’ Tom said. ‘And a jolly good one. He says we are all so covered with bugs anyway that a bit of extra dirt never hurts anyone.’

‘I'm glad he's not my doctor.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘And why. might I ask. is there a baked bean on the front of your shirt?’

‘We had them for lunch. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘And do you usually put your lunch on the front of your shirt? Tom? Is that what this famous doctor father of yours has taught you to do?’

‘Baked beans are hard to eat. Miss. Mcfarts. They keep falling off my fork.’

‘You are disgusting!’ The Mcfarts bellowed. ‘You are a walking germ-factory! I do not wish to see any more of you today! Go and stand in the corner on one leg with your face to the wall!’

‘But Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Don't argue with me. boy. or I will make you stand on your head! Now do as you are told!’

Tom went.

‘Now stay where you are. boy. while I test you on your spelling to see if you have learned anything at all this past week. And do not turn around when you talk to me. Keep your nasty little face to the wall. Now then. spell ‘write.’

‘Which one?’ Tom asked. ‘The thing you do with a pen or the one that means the opposite of wrong?’ He happened to be an unusually bright child and his mother had worked hard with him at home on spelling and reading.

‘The one with the pen. you little fool.’

Tom spelled it correctly which surprised the Mcfarts. She thought she had given him a very tricky word. one that he would not have learned yet. and she was peeved that he had succeeded.

Then Tom said, still balancing on one leg and facing the wall. 'Miss. Darling taught us how to spell a new exceptionally long word yesterday.'

'And what word was that?' the Mcfarts asked softly. The softer her voice became, the greater the danger, but Tom did not know this.

'Difficulty,' Tom said. 'Everyone in the class can spell 'difficulty' now.'

'What nonsense,' the Mcfarts said. 'You are not supposed to learn long words like that until you are at least eight or nine. And do not try to tell me everybody in the class can spell that word. You are lying to me. Tom.'

'Test someone,' Tom said, taking an awful chance. 'Test anyone you like.'

The Mcfarts dangerous glittering eyes roved around the classroom. 'You,' she said, pointing at a tiny and daft little girl called Prudence. 'Spell 'difficulty.'

Amazingly, Prudence spelled it correctly and without a moment's hesitation.

The Mcfarts were properly taken aback. 'Humph!' she snorted. 'And I suppose Miss. Darling wasted the whole of one lesson teaching you to spell that one single word?'

'Oh no, she didn't,' piped Tom. 'Miss. Darling taught it to us in three minutes, so we will never forget it. She teaches us lots of words in three minutes.'

'And what exactly is this magic method. Miss. Darling?' asked the Headmistress.

'I'll show you,' piped up the brave Tom again, coming to Miss.

Darling's rescue. 'Can I put my other foot down and turn around; please, while I show you?'

'You may do neither!' snapped the Mcfarts. 'Stay as you are and show me just the same!'

'All right,' said Tom, wobbling crazily on one leg. 'Miss. Darling gives us a little song about each word, and we all sing it

together and we learn to spell it in no time. Would you like to hear the song about 'struggle'?"

'I should be fascinated.' the Mcfarts said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

'Here it is.' Tom said.

'Ms. D. Ms. I. Ms. FFI

Ms. C. Ms. U. Ms. LTY.

Or M- i- ss -i- ss- I- pp- I- we go that on the other day...

That spells struggle.'

'How perfectly outlandish!' snorted the Mcfarts. 'Why are all these women married? And anyway, you are not meant to teach poetry when you are teaching spelling. Cut it out in the future. Miss. Darling.'

'But it does teach them some of the harder words wonderfully well.' Miss. Darling murmured.

'Don't argue with me. Miss. Darling!' the Headmistress thundered. 'Just do as you are told! I intend to now test the class on the multiplication tables to see if Miss. Darling has taught you anything at all in that direction.' The Mcfarts had returned to her place in front of the class, and her diabolical gaze was moving slowly along the rows of tiny pupils. 'You!' she barked, pointing at a small boy called Graceie in the front row. 'What are the two sevens?'

'Sixteen.' Graceie answered with foolish abandon.

The Mcfarts started advancing slowly and soft-footed upon Graceie in the manner of a tigress stalking a small deer. Graceie suddenly became aware of the danger signals and quickly tried again. 'It's eighteen!' he cried. 'Two sevens are eighteen. not sixteen!'

'Your ignorant little slug!' The Mcfarts bellowed. 'You witless weed! You empty-headed hamster! You- a stupid glob of glue!' She had now stationed herself directly behind Graceie, and suddenly she extended a hand the size of a tennis racquet and grabbed all the hair on Graceie's head in her fist. Graceie had a lot of golden-colored hair. His mother thought it was beautiful to behold and took delight in allowing it to grow extra-long.

The Mcfarts had as great a dislike for long hair on boys as she had for plaits and pigtails on girls, and she was about to show it. She took a firm grip on Graceie's long golden tresses with her giant hand and then, by raising her muscular right arm, she lifted the helpless boy clean out of his chair and held him aloft.

Graceie yelled. He twisted and squirmed and kicked the air and went on yelling like a stuck pig, and Miss. Mcfarts bellowed. 'Two sevens are fourteen! Two sevens are fourteen!

I am not letting you go till you say it!'

From the back of the class, Miss. Darling cried out. 'Miss. Mcfarts! Please let him down! You are hurting him! All his hair might come out!'

'And well it might if he doesn't stop wriggling!' snorted the Mcfarts. 'Keep still, you are squirming worm!'

It was a quite extraordinary sight to see this giant Headmistress dangling the small boy high in the air and the boy spinning and twisting like something on the end of a string and shrieking his head off.

'Say it!' bellowed the Mcfarts. 'Say two sevens are fourteen!

Hurry up or I will start jerking you up and down and then your hair really will come out and we will have enough of it to stuff a sofa! Get on with it boy! Say two sevens are fourteen and I will let you go!'

'T-t-two s-sevens are f-f-fourteen.' gasped Graceie. whereupon the Mcfarts, true to her words, opened her hand and quite literally let him go. He was a long way off the ground when she released him, and he plummeted to earth and hit the floor and bounced like a football.

'I don't like small people.' she was saying. 'Small people should never be seen by anybody. They should be kept out of sight in boxes like hairpins and buttons. I cannot for the life of me see why children must take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose.'

Another extremely brave little boy in the front row spoke up and spoke. 'But surely you were a small person once. Miss. Mcfarts. weren't you?'

'Get up and stop whimpering.' The Mcfarts barked.

Graceie got up and went back to his desk massaging his scalp with both hands. The Mcfarts returned to the front of the class. The children sat there hypnotized. None of them had seen anything quite like this before.

It was splendid entertainment. It was better than a pantomime, but with one significant difference. In this room, there was an enormous human bomb in front of them which was liable to explode and blow someone to bits at any moment. The children's eyes were riveted on the Headmistress.

'I was never a small person,' she snapped. 'I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way.'

'But you must have started as a baby,' the boy said.

'Me! A baby!' shouted the Mcfarts. 'How dare you suggest such a thing! What cheek! What infernal insolence! What is your name?

boy? And stand up when you speak to me!'

The boy stood up. 'My name is Jennie Ink. Miss. Mcfarts.'

He spoke.

'Jennie what?' The Mcfarts shouted.

'Ink.' the boy said.

'Don't be an ass, boy! There is no such name!'

'Look in the phone book,' Jennie said. 'You'll see my father there under Ink.'

'Very well, then,' the Mcfarts said. 'You may be Ink, young man, but let me tell you something. You are not indelible. I will very soon rub you out if you try getting clever with me. Spell what.'

'I don't understand,' Jennie said. 'What do you want me to spell?'

'Spell what. You idiot! Spell the word 'what!'' 'W. O. Tttta,' Jennie said, answering too quickly.

There was a nasty silence.

'I'll give you one more chance,' The Mcfarts said, not moving.

‘Ah yes. I know.’ Jennie said. ‘It has an H in it. W. H. O. T. It is easy.’ That is when she throws her out the window... by her underwire... the class stops as she makes her way back to class to do it all over...

In two large strides, the Mcfarts were behind Jennie's desk. and there she stood. a pillar of doom towering over the helpless boy. Jennie glanced fearfully back over his shoulder at the monster. ‘I was right. wasn't I?’ he murmured nervously. ‘You were wrong!’ the Mcfarts barked. ‘In fact, you strike me as the sort of poisonous little pockmark that will always be wrong! You sit wrong! You look wrong! You speak wrong! You are wrong all around! I will give you one more chance to be right! Spell ‘what!’

Jennie hesitated. Then he said very slowly. ‘It is not W. O. T., and it is not W. H. O. T. is there an E on the end, or no? Maybe...Ah. I know. It must be W. H. O. T. T.’

Standing behind Jennie. The Mcfarts reached out and took hold of the boy's two ears. one with each hand. pinching them between forefinger and thumb.

‘Ow!’ Jennie cried. ‘Ow! You are hurting me!’

‘I haven't started yet.’ the Mcfarts said energetically. As well as now. taking a firm grip on his two ears. she lifted him bodily out of his seat and held him aloft.

Like Graceie before her. Jennie squealed the house down.

From the back of the classroom Miss. Darling cried out. ‘Miss.

Mcfarts! Do not! Please let him go! His ears might come off!’

‘They'll never come off.’ the Mcfarts shouted back. ‘I have discovered through extensive experience. Miss. Darling. that the ears of small boys are stuck very firmly to their heads.’ ‘Let her go. Miss. Mcfarts. please.’ begged Miss. Darling. ‘You could damage him. you really could! You could wrench them right off!’

‘Ears never come off!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘They stretch most stunningly. like these are doing now. but I can assure you they never come off!’

Jennie was squealing louder than ever and pedaling the air with his legs.

Martrace had never seen a boy, or anyone else for that matter, held aloft by his ears alone. Like Miss. Darling, she felt sure both ears were going to come off at any moment with all the weight that was on them.

The Mcfarts were shouting, 'The word 'what' is spelled W. H. A. T. Now spell it, you little dick-wart!'

Jennie did not hesitate. He had learned from watching Graceie a few minutes before that the quicker you answered the quicker you were released. 'W. H. A. T.' he squealed.

'Spells what!'

Still holding him by the ears, The Mcfarts lowered him back into his chair behind his desk. Then she marched back to the front of the class, dusting off her hands one against the other like someone who has been handling something grimy.

There is nothing like a little meandering and fidgeting to encourage them to remember things. It concentrates their minds delightfully.' 'That's the way to make them learn, Miss. Darling,' she said. 'You take it from me. It is no good just telling them. You must hammer it into them.'

'You could do them permanent damage, Miss. Mcfarts.' Miss. Darling cried out.

'Oh, I have. I am quite sure I have,' the Mcfarts answered.

Grimming, 'Jennie's ears will have stretched quite considerably in the last couple of minutes! They will be much longer now than they were before. There is nothing wrong with that, Miss. Darling. It will give him an interesting pixie look for the rest of his life.'

'But Miss. Mcfarts.'

'Oh, do shut up, Miss. Darling! You are as wet as any of them. If you cannot cope here, then you can find a job in some cotton wool private school for rich brats. When you have been teaching for as long as I have, you will realize that it is no good at all being kind to children. Read Nicholas Nickleby, Miss. Darling, by Mr. Dickens.'

Read about Mr. Wakeford Squeers; the admirable principal of Sotheby's Hall. He knew how to handle the little brutes, did not he! He knew how to use birch, did not he! He kept their backsides warm so you could have fried eggs and bacon on them! A fine book, that. But I

do not suppose this bunch of morons we have here will ever read it because by the look of them they are never going to learn to read anything!’

‘I’ve read it.’ Martrace said quietly.

The Mcfarts flicked her head around and looked carefully at the small girl with dark hair and deep brown eyes sitting in the second row. ‘What did you say?’ she asked sharply.

‘I said I have read it. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Read what?’

‘Nicholas Nickleby. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘You are lying to me, madam!’ the Mcfarts shouted, glaring at Martrace. ‘I doubt there is a single child in the entire school who has read that book. And here you are, an unhatched shrimp sitting in the lowest form there is, trying to tell me about a whopping great lie like that! Why do you do it? You must take me for a fool! Do you take me for a fool? child?’

‘Well.’ Martrace said. Then she hesitated. She would like to have said, ‘Yes. I jolly well do.’ but that would have been suicide. ‘Well,’ she said again, still hesitating, still refusing to say ‘No.’

The Mcfarts sensed what the child was thinking, and she did not like it. ‘Stand up when you speak to me!’ she snapped.

‘What is your name?’

Martrace stood up and spoke. ‘My name is Martrace Dicksnoter. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘Dicksnoter, is it?’ the Mcfarts said. ‘In that case, you must be the daughter of that man who owns Dicksnoter Motors?’

‘Yes. Miss. Mcfarts.’

‘He’s a crook!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘A week ago, he sold me a second-hand car that he said was almost new. I thought he was a splendid person then. But this morning, while I was driving that car through the village. The entire engine fell out onto the road! The whole thing was filled with sawdust! The man’s a thief and a robber! I will have his skin for sausages, you see if I do not!’

‘He’s clever at his business.’ Martrace said.

‘Clever my foot!’ the Mcfarts shouted. ‘Miss. Darling tells me that you are meant to be clever. too! Well, madam. I do not like clever people! They are all crooked! You are most certainly crooked! Before I fell out with your father. He told me some very nasty stories about the way you behaved at home! But you would better not try anything at this school. young lady. I intend to keep an incredibly careful eye on you from now on.

Sit down and keep quiet.’

The First Miracle Martrace sat down again at her desk. The Mcfarts seated herself behind the teacher's table- muting to herself yes make-fun of my name. It was the first time she had sat down during the lesson.

Then she reached out her hand and took hold of her water jug. Still holding the jug by the handle but not lifting it yet. she spoke. ‘I have never been able to understand why small children are so disgusting.

They are the bane of my life. They are like insects. They should be got rid of as early as possible. We get rid of flies with fly-spray and by hanging up flypaper. I have often thought of inventing a spray to get rid of small children. How splendid it would be to walk into this classroom with a gigantic spray-gun in my hands and start pumping it. Or better still. some huge strips of sticky paper.

I would hang them all around the school and you would all get stuck to them and that would be the end of it. Wouldn't that be a clever idea?

Miss. Darling?’

‘If it is meant to be a joke. Principal. I do not think it is a very funny one.’ Miss. Darling said from the back of the class. ‘You would not. would you. Miss. Darling.’ the Mcfarts said. ‘And it is not meant to be a joke. My idea of a perfect school. Miss. Darling. has no children in it at all. One of these days I intend to start up a school like that. I think it will be phenomenally successful.’

The women mad. Miss. Darling was telling herself. She is round- the twist. She is the one who ought to be got rid of.

The Mcfarts now lifted the large blue porcelain water jug and poured some water into her glass. And suddenly. with water. out came the long slimy newt straight into the glass. plop!

The Mcfarts let out a yell and leaped off her chair as though a firecracker had gone off underneath her. And now the children also saw the long thin slimy yellow-bellied lizard like a creature twisting and turning in the glass. and they squirmed and jumped about as well. shouting. 'What is it?

Oh. It is disgusting! It is a snake! It is a baby crocodile! It is an alligator!

'Lookout. Miss. Mcfarts!' cried Dasey. 'I'll bet it bites!'

The Mcfarts. this female giant. stood there in her green breeches. quivering like a blancmange. She was especially furious that someone had succeeded in making her jump and yell like that because she prided herself on her toughness. She stared at the creature twisting and wriggling in the glass. Curiously enough. She had never seen a newt before. Natural history was not her strong point. She had not the faintest idea what this thing was. It certainly looked extremely unpleasant. Slowly she sat down again in her chair.

She looked at this moment more terrifying than ever before. The fires of fury and hatred were smoldering in her small black eyes.

'Martrace!' she barked. 'Stand up!'

'Who. me?' Martrace said. 'What have I done?'

'Stand up. you are a disgusting little cockroach!'

'I have not done anything. Miss. Mcfarts. Honestly, I have not. I have never seen that slimy thing before!'

'Stand up at once; you- filthy little maggot SHIT!'

Reluctantly. Martrace got to her feet. She was in the second row. Dasey was in the row behind her. feeling a bit guilty. She had not intended to get her friend into trouble. On the other hand. She was certainly not about to own up.

"You are vile. repulsive. repellent. malicious little brute!" the Mcfarts was shouting. 'You are not fit to be in this school! You ought to be behind bars. That is where you ought to be! I intend to have you drummed out of this establishment in utter disgrace! I intend to have the prefects chase you down the corridor and out of the front door with hockey-sticks! I intend to have the staff escort you home under armed guard! And then I intend to make sure you are sent to a reformatory for delinquent girls for a minimum of forty years!'

The Mcfarts was in such a rage that her face had taken on a boiling color and little flecks of froth were gathering at the corners of her mouth. Nevertheless. She was not the only one who was losing her cool. Martrace was also beginning to see red. She did not in the least mind being accused of having done something she had done. She could see the justice of that. It was, however, a new experience for her to be accused of a crime that she had not committed. She had had absolutely nothing to do with that beastly creature in the glass. By golly, she thought, that rotten Mcfarts is not going to pin this one on me!

‘I did not do it!’ she screamed.

‘Oh yes, you did!’ the Mcfarts roared back. ‘Nobody else could have thought up a trick like that! Your father was right to warn me about you!’ The woman had lost control of herself completely. She was ranting like a maniac. ‘You are finished in this school, young lady!’ she shouted. ‘You are finished everywhere. I intend to personally see to it that you are put away in a place where not even the crows can land their droppings on you! You will never become exposed again!’

‘I’m telling you I did not do it!’ Martrace screamed. ‘I’ve never even seen a creature like that in my life!’

‘You have put a. a. a crocodile in my drinking water!’ the Mcfarts yelled back. ‘There is no worse crime in the world against a Headmistress! Now sit down and do not say a word! Go on, sit down at once!’

‘But I’m telling you.’ Martrace shouted, refusing to sit down.

‘I am telling you to shut up!’ the Mcfarts roared. ‘If you do not shut up at once and sit down, I intend to remove my belt and let you have it with the end that has the buckle!’

Slowly Martrace sat down. Oh, the rottenness of it all! The unfairness! How dare they expel her for something she had not done!

Martrace felt herself getting angrier, and angrier, and angrier, so unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon.

The newt was still squirming in the tall glass of water. It looked uncomfortable. The glass was not big enough for it. Martrace glared at the Mcfarts. How she hated her. She glared at the glass with the newt in it. She longed to march up and grab the glass and tip the contents, newt and all, over the Mcfarts’s head. She trembled to think what the Mcfarts would do to her if she did that.

The Mcfarts were sitting behind the teacher's table starting with a mixture of horror and fascination at the newt wriggling in the glass. Martrace's eyes were also riveted on the glass. And now, quite slowly. There began to creep over Martrace a most extraordinary and peculiar feeling. The feeling was mostly in the eyes. A kind of electricity was gathering inside them. A sense of power was brewing in her eyes. a feeling of great strength was settling deep inside her eyes. But there was also another feeling which was something else altogether. and which she could not understand. It was like flashes of lightning.

Little waves of lightning were flashing out of her eyes. Her eyeballs were beginning to get hot. as though vast energy was building up somewhere inside them. It was an amazing sensation. She kept her eyes steadily on the glass. and now the power was concentrating in one small part of each eye and growing stronger and stronger, and it felt as though millions of tiny little invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out of her eyes towards the glass she was staring at. 'Tip it!' Martrace whispered. 'Tip it over!'

She saw the glass wobble. It tilted backward a fraction of an inch. then righted itself again. She kept pushing at it with all those millions of invisible little arms and hands that were reaching out from her eyes. feeling the power that was flashing straight from the two little black dots in the very centers of her eyeballs.

'Tip it!' she whispered again. 'Tip it over!'

Once more the glass wobbled. She pushed harder still. willing her eyes to shoot out more power. And then; very- very slowly. so slowly she could hardly see it happening. The glass began to lean backward. farther and farther and farther back until it was balancing on just one edge of its base. And there it teetered for a few seconds before finally toppling over and falling with a sharp tinkle onto the desktop. The water in it and the squirming newt splashed out all over Miss. Mcfarts's enormous bosom. The principal let out a yell that must have rattled every windowpane in the building and for the second time in the last five minutes she shot out of her chair like a rocket.

The newt clutched desperately at the cotton smock where it covered the great chest and there it clung with its little claw-like feet. The Mcfarts looked down and saw it and she bellowed even louder and with a swipe of her hand, she sent the creature flying across the classroom. It landed on the floor beside Dasey's desk and very quickly she ducked down and picked it up and put it into her pencil-box for another time. A newt. she decided. It was a useful thing to have around.

The Mcfarts. Her face is more like a boiled ham than ever. was standing before the class quivering with fury. Her massive bosom was heaving in and out and the splash of water down the front of it made a dark wet patch that had soaked right through to her skin.

‘Who did it?’ she roared. ‘Come on! Own up! Step forward! You will not escape this time! Who is responsible for this dirty job? Who pushed over this glass?’

Nobody answered. The whole room remained silent as a tomb.

‘Martrace!’ she roared. ‘It was you! I know it was you!’

Martrace. in the second row. sat very still and said nothing. A strange feeling of serenity and confidence was sweeping over her and suddenly, she found that she was frightened by nobody in the world. With the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip and spill its contents over the horrible Headmistress. and anybody who could do that could do anything.

‘Speak up. you clotted carbuncle!’ roared the Mcfarts.

‘Admit that you did it!’

Martrace looked right back into the flashing eyes of this infuriated female giant and said with total calmness. ‘I have not moved away from my desk. Miss. Mcfarts. since the lesson began. I can say no more.’

Suddenly the entire class seemed to rise against the Headmistress. ‘She didn't move!’ they cried out. ‘Martrace did not move! Nobody moved! You must have knocked it over yourself!’

‘I most certainly did not knock it over myself!’ roared the Mcfarts. ‘How dare you suggest a thing like that! Speak up. Miss. Darling! You must have seen everything! Who knocked over my glass?’

‘None of the children did. Miss. Mcfarts.’ Miss. Darling answered. ‘I can vouch for it that nobody has moved from his or her desk all the time you have been here. except for Tom and he has not moved from his corner.’

Miss. Mcfarts glared at Miss. Darling. Miss. Darling met her gaze without flinching. ‘I am telling you the truth. Principal.’ she said. ‘You must have knocked it over without knowing it. That sort of thing is easy to do.’

‘I am fed up with you- a useless bunch of clown holes!’
Roared the Mcfarts. ‘I refuse to waste any more of my precious time here!’ And with that, she marched out of the classroom. slamming the door behind her.

In the stunned silence that followed. Miss. Darling walked up to the front of the class and stood behind her table. ‘Phew!’ she said. ‘I think we have had enough school for one day. don't you? The class is to dismiss. You may all go out to the playground and wait for your parents to take you home.’

(The Second Miracle)

Martrace did not join the rush to get out of the classroom. After the other children had all disappeared. She remained at her desk. quiet and thoughtful. She knew she had to tell somebody about what had happened with the glass. She could not keep a gigantic secret like that bottled up inside her. What she needed was just one person. one wise and sympathetic grown-up who could help her to understand the meaning of this extraordinary happening.

Neither her mother nor her father would be of any use at all. If they believed her story. and it was doubtful they would. They certainly would fail to realize what an astounding event it was that had taken place in the classroom that afternoon. Impulsively. Martrace decided that the one person she would like to confide in was Miss. Darling.

Martrace and Miss. Darling were now the only two lefts in the classroom. Miss. Darling had seated herself at her table and was rifling through some papers. She looked up and spoke.

‘Well; Martrace. aren't you going outside with the others?’

Martrace said. ‘Please, may I talk to you for a moment?’

‘Of course, you may. What is troubling you?’

‘Something very peculiar has happened to me. Miss. Darling.’

19

Miss. Darling became instantly alert. Ever since the two disastrous meetings she had had recently about Martrace. the first with the Headmistress and the second with the dreadful Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter. Miss. Darling had been thinking a great deal about this child and wondering how she could help her. And now. There was

Martrace sitting in the classroom with a curiously exalted look on her face and asking if she could have a private talk. Miss. Darling had never seen her looking so wide-eyed and peculiar before.

‘Yes. Martrace.’ she said. ‘Tell me what has happened to you that is so peculiar.’

‘Miss. Mcfarts is not going to expel me. is she?’ Martrace asked. ‘Because it was not me who put that creature in her jug of water. I promise you it was not.’

‘I know it wasn't.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘Am I going to be expelled?’

‘I think not.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The Headmistress simply got a little over-excited. That is all.’

‘Good.’ Martrace said. ‘But that isn't what I want to talk to you about.’

‘What do you want to talk to me about. Martrace?’

‘I want to talk to you about the glass of water with the creature in it.’ Martrace said. ‘You saw it spilling all over Miss. Mcfarts. didn't you?’

‘I did indeed.’

‘Well. Miss. Darling. I did not touch it. I never went near it.’

‘I know you didn't.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You heard me telling the

Principal that it could not have been you.’

‘Ah. but it was me. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘That's exactly what I want to talk to you about.’

Miss. Darling paused and looked carefully at the child. ‘I don't think I quite follow you.’ she said.

‘I got so angry at being accused of something I hadn't done that I made it happen.’

‘You made that happen. Martrace?’

‘I made the glass tip over.’

‘I still don't quite understand what you mean.’ Miss. Darling said gently.

‘I did it with my eyes.’ Martrace said. ‘I was staring at it and wishing it to tip and then my eyes went all hot and funny and some sort of power came out of them, and the glass just toppled over.’

Miss. Darling continued to look steadily at Martrace through her steel-rimmed spectacles and Martrace looked back at her just as steadily.

‘I am still not following you.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Do you mean you willed the glass to tip over?’

‘Yes.’ Martrace said. ‘With my eyes.’

Miss. Darling was silent for a moment. She did not think Martrace was meaning to tell a lie. It was more likely that she was simply allowing her vivid imagination to run away with her. ‘You mean you were sitting where you are now, and you told the glass to topple over, and it did?’

‘Something like that. Miss. Darling. yes.’

‘If you did that. then it is about the greatest miracle a person has ever performed since the time of Jesus.’

‘I did it. Miss. Darling.’

It is extraordinary. thought Miss. Darling. How often do small children have flights of fancy like this? She decided to put an end to it as gently as possible. ‘Could you do it again?’ she asked. kindly.

‘I don't know.’ Martrace said. ‘But I think I might be able to.’

Miss. Darling moved the now empty glass to the middle of the table. ‘Should I put water in it?’ she asked. smiling a little.

‘I don't think it matters.’ Martrace said.

‘Very well. then. Go ahead and tip it over.’

‘It may take some time.’

Take all the time you want.’ Miss. Darling said. I am in no hurry.’

Martrace. Sitting in the second row about ten feet away from Miss. Darling. put her elbows on the desk and cupped her face in her hands. and this time she gave the order right at the beginning. 'Tip glass. tip!' she ordered. but her lips did not move, and she made no sound. She simply shouted the words inside her head.

-And-

Now she concentrated the whole of her mind and her brain and her will up into her eyes and once again but much more quickly than before she felt the electricity gathering and the power was beginning to surge, and the heat was coming into the eyeballs. and then the millions of tiny invisible arms with hands-on them were shooting out towards the glass. and without making any sound at all she kept on shouting inside her head for the glass to go over. She saw it wobble. then it tilted. Then it toppled right over and fell with a tinkle onto the tabletop not twelve inches from Miss. Darling's folded arms.

Miss. Darling's mouth dropped open and her eyes stretched so wide you could see the whites all around. She did not say a word. She could not. The shock of seeing the miracle performed had struck her dumb. She gaped at the glass. leaning far away from it now as though it might be a dangerous thing. Then slowly she lifted her head and looked at Martrace. She saw the child white in the face. as white as paper. trembling all over. the eyes glazed. staring straight ahead and seeing nothing. My whole face was transfigured. Her eyes were round and bright, and she was sitting there speechless. quite beautiful in a blaze of silence.

Miss. Darling waited. trembling a little herself and watching the child as she slowly stirred herself back into consciousness.

And then suddenly. click went her face into a look of almost seraphic calm. 'I'm all right.' she said and smiled. 'I am quite all right. Miss. Darling. So do not be alarmed.'

'You seemed so far away.' Miss. Darling whispered. awestruck.

'Oh. I was. I was flying past the stars on silver wings.'

Martrace said. 'It was wonderful.'

Miss. Darling was still gazing at the child in absolute wonderment. as though she were The Creation. The Beginning of The World. The First Morning.

‘It went much quicker this time.’ Martrace said quietly.

‘It’s not possible!’ Miss. Darling was gasping. ‘I do not believe it! I simply do not believe it!’ She closed her eyes and kept them closed for quite a while. and when she opened them again it seemed as though she had gathered herself together. ‘Would you like to come back and have tea at my cottage?’ she asked.

‘Oh. I would love to.’ Martrace said.

‘Good. Gather up your things and I will meet you outside in a couple of minutes.’

‘You will not tell anyone about this. this thing that I did. will you. Miss. Darling?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’ Miss. Darling said.

Miss. Darling’s Cottage

Miss. Darling joined Martrace outside the school gates and the two of them walked in silence through the village Love Street. They passed the greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges. and the butcher with bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up. and a small bank. and the grocery store and the electrical shop. and then they came out on the other side of the village onto the narrow country road where there were no people anymore and very few motorcars.

-And-

Now they were alone. Martrace suddenly became wildly animated. A valve had burst inside her, and a great gush of energy was being released. She trotted beside Miss. Darling with wild little hops and her fingers flew as if she would scatter them to the four winds and her words went off like fireworks. with terrific speed. It was from Miss. Darling this and Miss. Darling that and Miss. Darling. I do honestly feel I could move anything in the world. not just tipping over glasses and trivial things like that. I feel I could topple tables and chairs. Miss. Darling. Even when people are sitting in the chairs, I think I could push them over. and bigger things too. much bigger things than chairs and tables.

I only must take a moment to get my eyes strong and then I can push them out. this strongness. at anything at all so long as I am staring at it hard enough. I must stare at it extremely hard. Miss. Darling. extremely hard. and then I can feel it all happening behind my

eyes. and my eyes get hot just as though they were burning but I do not mind that in the least. and Miss. Darling.

‘Calm yourself down. child. calm yourself down.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Let us not get ourselves too worked up so early in the proceedings.’

‘But you do think it is interesting. don't you? Miss. Darling?’

‘Oh. it is interesting all right.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘It is more than interesting. But we must tread very carefully from now on. Martrace.’

‘Why must we tread carefully. Miss. Darling?’

‘Because we are playing with mysterious forces. my child. that we know nothing about. I do not think they are evil. They may be good. They may even be divine. But whether they are or not. let us handle them carefully.’

These were wise words from a wise old bird. but Martrace was too steamed up to see it that way. ‘I don't see why we have to be so careful?’ she said. still hopping about.

‘I am trying to explain to you.’ Miss. Darling said patiently. ‘That we are dealing with the unknown. It is an unexplainable thing. The right word for it is a phenomenon. It is a phenomenon.’

‘Am I a phenomenon?’ Martrace asked.

‘It is quite possible that you are.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I would rather you did not think about yourself as anything now. What I thought we might do is to explore this phenomenon a little further. just the two of us together. but make sure we take things very carefully all the time.’

‘You want me to do some more of it then. Miss. Darling?’

‘That is what I am tempted to suggest.’ Miss. Darling said cautiously.

‘Goody-good.’ Martrace said.

‘I.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I am far more bowled over by what you did than you are. and I am trying to find some reasonable explanation.’

‘Such as what?’ Martrace asked.

‘Such as whether or not it's got something to do with the fact that you are quite exceptionally precocious.’

‘What exactly does that word mean?’ Martrace said.

‘A precocious child.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Is one that shows amazing intelligence early on. You are an unbelievably precocious child.’

‘Am I really?’ Martrace asked.

‘Of course, you are. You must be aware of that. Look at what you are reading. Look at your mathematics.’

‘I suppose you're right.’ Martrace said.

Miss. Darling marveled at the child's lack of conceit and self-consciousness.

‘I can't help wondering.’ she said. ‘Whether this sudden ability that has come to you. of being able to move an object without touching it. whether it might not have something to do with your brainpower.’

‘You mean there might not be room in my head for all those brains, so something has to push out?’

‘That's not quite what I mean.’ Miss. Darling said, smiling. ‘But whatever happens. and I say it again. We must tread carefully from now on. I have not forgotten that strange and distant glimmer on your face after you tipped over the last glass.’

‘Do you think doing it could hurt me? Is that what you are thinking? Miss. Darling?’

‘It made you feel peculiar. didn't it?’

‘It made me feel lonely.’ Martrace said. ‘For a moment or two, I was flying past the stars on silver wings. I told you that. And I intend to tell you something else. Miss. Darling? It was easier the second time. much easier. It is like anything else. the more you practice it. the easier it gets.’

Miss. Darling was walking slowly so that the small child could keep up with her without trotting too fast. and it was very peaceful out there on the narrow road now that the village was behind

them. It was one of those golden autumn afternoons and there were blackberries and splashes of old man's beard in the hedges. and the hawthorn berries were ripening scarlet for the birds when the chilly winter came along.

There were tall trees here and there on either side. oak, sycamore, and ash and occasionally a sweet chestnut. Miss. Darling. wishing to change the subject for the moment. gave the names of all these to Martrace and taught her how to recognize them by the shape of their leaves and the pattern of the bark on their trunks. Martrace took all this in and stored the knowledge away carefully in her mind.

They came finally to a gap in the hedge on the left-hand side of the road where there was a five-barred gate. 'This way.' Miss.

Darling said. and she opened the gate and led Martrace through and closed it again. They were now walking along a narrow lane that was no more than a rutted cart-track. There was a high hedge of hazel on either side, and you could see clusters of ripe brown nuts in their green jackets. The squirrels would be collecting them all very soon. Miss. Darling said. and storing them away carefully for the bleak months ahead.

'You mean you live down here?' Martrace asked.

'I do.' Miss. Darling replied. but she said no more.

Martrace had never once stopped to think about where Miss. Darling might be living. She had always regarded her purely as a teacher. a person who turned up out of nowhere and taught at school and then went away again. Are any of us children? she wondered. ever stop to ask ourselves where our teachers go when school is over for the day? Do we wonder if they live alone? or if there is a mother at home, a sister, or a husband? 'Do you live all by yourself? Miss. Darling?' she asked.

'Yes.' Miss. Darling said. 'Very much so.'

They were walking over the deep sunbaked mud-tracks of the lane, and you had to watch where you put your feet if you did not want to twist your ankle. There were a few small birds around in the hazel branches but that was all.

'It's just a farm laborer's cottage.' Miss. Darling said. 'You must not expect too much of it. We are there.'

They came to a small green gate half-buried in the hedge on the right and almost hidden by the overhanging hazel branches.

Miss. Darling paused with one hand on the gate and spoke. 'There it is. That is where I live.'

Martrace saw a narrow dirt path leading to a tiny red-brick cottage. The cottage was so small it looked more like a doll's house than a human dwelling. The bricks it was built of were old and crumbly and very pale red. It had a grey slate roof and one small chimney. and there were two little windows at the front.

Each window was no larger than a sheet of a tabloid newspaper and there was no upstairs to the place. On either side of the path, there was a wilderness of nettles and blackberry thorns and long brown grass. An enormous oak tree stood overshadowing the cottage. Its massive spreading branches were enfolding and embracing the tiny building. and hiding it as well from the rest of the world.

Miss. Darling, with one hand on the gate which she had not yet opened, turned to Martrace and spoke. 'A poet called Dylan Thomas once wrote some lines that I think of every time I walk up this path.'

Martrace waited. and Miss. Darling, in a wonderful slow voice, began reciting the poem:

'Never and never. My girl is riding far and near in the land of the hearthstone tales. and fell asleep.

Fear or believe that the wolf in the sheep-white hood
Looping and bleating roughly and blithely intends to leap. my dear. my dear.

Out of a lair in the flocked leaves in the dew-dipped year
to eat your heart in the house in the rosy wood.'

There was a moment of silence. and Martrace. Who had never heard great romantic poetry spoken aloud? was profoundly moved. 'It's like music.' she whispered.

'It is music.' Miss. Darling said. And then. as though embarrassed at having revealed such a secret part of herself. She quickly pushed open the gate and walked up the path.

Martrace hung back. She was a bit frightened of this place now.

It seemed so unreal, remote, fantastic, and so away from this earth. It was like an illustration in Grimm or Hans Andersen. It was the house where the poor woodcutter lived with Hansel and Gretel and

where Red Riding Hood's grandmother lived, and it was also the house of The Seven Dwarfs and The Three Bears and all the rest of them. It was straight out of a fairy-tale.

‘Come along, my dear.’ Miss. Darling called back, and Martrace followed her up the path.

The front door was covered with flaky green paint and there was no keyhole. Miss. Darling simply lifted the latch, pushed open the door, and went in. Although she was not a tall woman. She had to stoop low to get through the doorway. Martrace went after her and found herself in a dark narrow tunnel.

‘You can come through to the kitchen and help me make the tea.’ Miss. Darling said, and she led the way along the tunnel into the kitchen - that is if you could call it a kitchen. It was not much bigger than a good-sized clothes cupboard and there was one small window in the back wall with a sink under the window.

But there were no taps over the sink. Against another wall, there was a shelf, to prepare food, and there was a single cupboard above the shelf. On the shelf itself there stood a Primus stove, a saucepan and a half-full bottle of milk. A Primus is a little camping-stove that you fill with paraffin, and you light it at the top and then you pump it to get pressure from the flame.

‘You can get me some water while I light the Primus.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘The well is out at the back. Take the bucket. Here it is. You will find a rope in the well. Just hook the bucket onto the end of the rope and lower it down, but do not fall in yourself.’ Martrace, more bemused than ever now, took the bucket and carried it out into the back garden.

The well had a little wooden roof over it and a simple winding device and there was the rope dangling down into a dark bottomless hole. Martrace pulled up the rope and hooked the handle of the bucket onto the end of it. Then she lowered it until she heard a splash, and the rope went slack. She pulled it up again and lo and behold. There was water in the bucket.

‘Is that enough?’ she asked, carrying it in.

‘Just about.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I don't suppose you've ever done that before?’

‘Never.’ Martrace said. ‘It is fun. How do you get enough water for your bath?’

‘I don't take a bath.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I was standing up. I get a bucketful of water and I heat it on this little stove, and I strip and wash all over.’

‘Do you honestly do that?’ Martrace asked.

‘Of course, I do.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Every poor person in England used to wash that way until not so exceptionally long ago. And they did not have a Primus. They had to heat the water over the fire in the hearth.’

‘Are you poor? Miss. Darling?’

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Very. It is a good little stove. isn't it?’

The Primus was roaring away with a powerful blue flame and already the water in the saucepan was beginning to bubble. Miss. Darling got a teapot from the cupboard and put some tea leaves into it. She also found half a small loaf of brown bread. She cut it into two thin slices and then, from a plastic container. She took some margarine and spread it on the bread.

Margarine. Martrace thought. She really must be poor.

Miss. Darling found a tray and on it, she put two mugs, the teapot, the half-bottle of milk and a plate with the two slices of bread. ‘I'm afraid I don't have any sugar.’ she said. ‘I never use it.’

‘That's all right.’ Martrace said. In her wisdom, she was aware of the delicacy of the situation, and she was taking great care not to say anything to embarrass her companion.

‘Let us have it in the sitting-room.’ Miss. Darling said, picking up the tray and leading the way out of the kitchen and down the dark little tunnel into the room at the front. Martrace followed her. But just inside the doorway of the so-called sitting room she stopped and stared around her in absolute amazement. The room was as small and square and bare as a prison cell. The pale daylight that entered came from a single tiny window in the front wall, but there were no curtains. The only objects in the entire room were two upturned wooden boxes to serve as chairs and a third box between them for a table. That was all.

There were no pictures on the walls, no carpet on the floor, only rough unpolished wooden planks, and there were gaps between the planks where dust and bits of grime had gathered. The ceiling was so low that with a jump Martrace could nearly touch it with her fingertips.

The walls were white, but the whiteness did not look like paint. Martrace rubbed her palm against it and white powder came off onto her skin. It was a whitewash. the cheap stuff that is used in cowsheds, stables, and henhouses.

Martrace was appalled. Was this really where her neat and trimly dressed schoolteacher lived? Was this all she had to come back to after a day's work? It was unbelievable. And what was the reason for it? There was something very strange going on around here. surely.

Miss. Darling put the tray on one of the upturned boxes. 'Sit down. my dear. sit down.' she said. 'And we will have a nice hot cup of tea. Help yourself to bread. Both slices are for you. I never eat anything when I get home. I have a good old tuck-in at the school lunch and that keeps me going until the next morning.'

Martrace perched carefully on an upturned box and more out of politeness than anything else she took a slice of bread and margarine and started to eat it. At home, she would have buttered toast and strawberry jam and a piece of sponge-Cherry pie to round it off. And yet this was somehow far more fun. There was a mystery here in this house. a great mystery. There was no doubt about that. and Martrace was longing to find out what it was.

Miss. Darling poured the tea and added a little milk to both cups. She was not in the least ill at ease sitting on an upturned box in a bare room and drinking tea out of a mug that she balanced on her knee.

'You know.' she said. 'I have been thinking extremely hard about what you did with that glass. It is a great power you have been given. my child. you know that.'

'Yes. Miss. Darling. I do.' Martrace said. chewing her bread and margarine.

'So far as I know.' Miss. Darling went on. 'Nobody else in the history of the world has been able to compel an object to move without touching it, blowing on it, or using any outside help at all.'

Martrace nodded but said nothing.

'The fascinating thing.' Miss. Darling said. 'Would be to find out the real limit of this power of yours. Oh. I know you think you can move about anything there is. but I have my doubts about that.' 'I'd love to try something huge.' Martrace said.

'What about the distance?' Miss. Darling asked. 'Would you always have to be close to the thing you were pushing?'

‘I simply don't know.’ Martrace said. ‘But it would be fun to find out.’

Miss. Darling's Story

‘We mustn't hurry this.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘So, let us have another cup of tea. And do eat that other slice of bread. You must be hungry.’

Martrace took the second slice and started eating it slowly. The margarine was not at all bad. She doubted whether she could have told the difference if she had not known. ‘Miss. Darling.’ she said suddenly. ‘Do they pay you very badly at our school?’

Miss. Darling looked up sharply. ‘Not too badly.’ she said. ‘I get about the same as the others.’

‘But it must still be extraordinarily little if you are so dreadfully poor.’ Martrace said. ‘Do all the teachers live like this. with no furniture and no kitchen stove and no bathroom?’

‘No. they don't.’ Miss. Darling said stiffly. ‘I just happen to be the exception.’

‘I expect you just happen to like living in an amazingly straightforward way.’ Martrace said, probing a little further. ‘It must make house cleaning an awful lot easier and you do not have furniture to polish or any of those silly little ornaments lying around that must be dusted every day. And I suppose if you do not have a fridge, you do not have to go out and buy all sorts of junky things like eggs and mayonnaise and ice cream to fill it up with. It must save a terrific lot of shopping.’

At this point, Martrace noticed that Miss. Darling's face had gone all tight and peculiar-looking. Her whole body had become rigid. Her shoulders were hunched up high and her lips were pressed together tightly, and she sat there gripping her mug of tea in both hands and staring down into it as though searching for a way to answer these not-quite-so-innocent questions.

There followed a long and embarrassing silence. In the space of thirty seconds, the atmosphere in the tiny room had changed completely and now it was vibrating with awkwardness and secrets.

Martrace said. ‘I am deeply sorry I asked you those questions. Miss. Darling. It is none of my business.’

At this, Miss. Darling seemed to rouse herself. She gave a shake of her shoulders and then very carefully she placed her mug on the tray.

‘Why shouldn't you ask?’ she said. ‘You were bound to ask in the end. You are much too bright not to have wondered. I even wanted to ask you. That is why I invited you here. You are the first visitor to come to the cottage since I moved in two years ago.’

Martrace said nothing. She could feel the tension growing and growing in the room.

‘You are so much wiser than your years, my dear.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘That it quite staggers me. Although you look like a child. You are not a child at all because your mind and your powers of reasoning are fully grown-up. So, I suppose we might call you a grown-up child, if you see what I mean.’

Martrace still did not say anything. She was waiting for what was coming next.

‘Up to now.’ Miss. Darling went on. ‘I have found it impossible to talk to anyone about my problems. I could not face the embarrassment, and anyway, I lack courage. Any courage I had was knocked out of me when I was young. But now, Suddenly, I have a desperate wish to tell everything to somebody. I know you are only a tiny little girl, but there is magic in you somewhere. I have seen it with my own eyes.’

Martrace became very alert. The voice she was hearing was surely crying out for help. It must be. It had to be.

Then the voice spoke again. ‘Have some more tea.’ it said.

‘I think there's still a drop left.’

Martrace nodded.

Miss. Darling poured tea into both mugs and added milk. Again, she cupped her mug in both hands and sat there sipping.

There was quite a long silence before she said. ‘May I tell you a story?’

‘Of course.’ Martrace said.

‘I am twenty-three years old.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘And when I was born my father was a doctor in this village. We had a nice

old house. quite large. red brick. It is tucked away in the woods behind the hills. I do not think you would know it.'

Martrace kept silent.

'I was born there.' Miss. Darling said. 'And then came the first tragedy. My mother died when I was two. My father. a busy doctor. had to have someone to run the house and to look after me. So, he invited my mother's unmarried sister. my aunt. to come and live with us. She agreed and she came.'

Martrace was listening intently. 'How old was the aunt when she moved in?' she asked.

'Not incredibly old.' Miss. Darling said. 'I should say about thirty. But I hated her right from the start. I missed my mother terribly. And the aunt was not a kind person. My father did not know that because he was hardly ever around but when he did put on an appearance. the aunt behaved differently.'

Miss. Darling paused and sipped her tea. 'I can't think why I am telling you all this.' she said. embarrassed.

'Go on.' Martrace said. 'Please.'

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'Then came the second tragedy. When I was five. my father died very suddenly. One day he was there and the next day he was gone. And so, I was left to live alone with my aunt. She became my legal guardian. She had all the powers of a parent over me. And in some way or another. she became the actual owner of the house.'

'How did your father die?' Martrace asked.

'It is interesting you should ask that.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was much too young to question it at the time. but I found out later that there was a good deal of mystery surrounding his death.'

'Didn't they know how he died?' Martrace asked.

'Well. not exactly.' Miss. Darling said. hesitating. 'You see. No one could believe that he would ever have done it. He was such a very sane and sensible man.'

'Done what?' Martrace asked.

'Killed himself.'

Martrace was stunned. 'Did he?' she gasped.

'That's what it looked like.' Miss. Darling said. 'But who knows?' She shrugged and turned away and stared out of the tiny window.

'I know what you're thinking.' Martrace said. 'You're thinking that the aunt killed him and made it look as though he'd done it himself.'

'I am not thinking anything.' Miss. Darling said. 'One must never think things like that without proof.'

The little room became quiet. Martrace noticed that the hands clasping the mug were trembling slightly. 'What happened after that?' she asked. 'What happened when you were left all alone with the aunt? Wasn't she nice to you?'

'Nice?' Miss. Darling said. 'She was a demon. As soon as my father was out of the way she became a holy terror. My life was a nightmare.'

'What did she do to you?' Martrace asked.

'I don't want to talk about it.' Miss. Darling said. 'It is too horrible. But in the end, I became so frightened of her I used to start shaking when she came into the room. You must understand I was never a strong character like you. I was always shy and retiring.'

'Didn't you have any other relations?' Martrace asked. 'Any uncles, aunts, or grannies who would see you?' 'None that I knew about.' Miss. Darling said. 'They were all either dead or they had gone to Australia. And that is still the way it is now. I am afraid.'

'So, you grew up in that house alone with your aunt.'

Martrace said. 'But you must have gone to school.'

'Of course.' Miss. Darling said. 'I went to the same school you are going to know. But I lived at home.' Miss. Darling paused and stared down into her empty tea-mug. 'I think what I am trying to explain to you.' she said. 'Is that over the years I

became so completely cowed and dominated by this monster of an aunt when she gave me an order. no matter what it was. I obeyed it instantly. That can happen. you know. And by the time I was ten. I had become her slave. I did all the housework. I made her bed. I

washed and ironed for her. I did all the cooking. I learned how to do everything.'

'But surely you could have complained to somebody?' Martrace said.

'To whom?' Miss. Darling said. 'And anyway. I was far too terrified to complain. I told you. I was her slave.'

'Did she beat you?'

'Let us not go into details.' Miss. Darling said.

'How simply awful.' Martrace said. 'Did you cry nearly all the time?'

'Only when I was alone.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was not allowed to cry in front of her. But I lived in fear.'

'What happened when you left school?' Martrace asked.

'I was a bright pupil.' Miss. Darling said. 'I could easily have into university. But there was no question about that.'

'Why not. Miss. Darling?'

'Because I was needed at home to do the work.'

'Then how did you become a teacher?' Martrace asked.

'There is a Teacher's Training College in Reading.' Miss. Darling said. 'That's only forty minutes' bus-ride away from here. I was allowed to go there on the condition I came straight home again every afternoon to do the washing and ironing and to clean the house and cook the supper.'

'How old were you then?' Martrace asked.

'When I went into Teacher's Training, I was eighteen.' Miss. Darling said.

'You could have just packed up and walked away.' Martrace said.

'Not until I got a job.' Miss. Darling said. 'And do not forget. I was by then dominated by my aunt to such an extent that I would not have dared. You cannot imagine what it is like to be completely controlled like that by an extraordinarily strong personality. It turns you into jelly. So that is it. That is the sad story of my life.'

Now I have talked enough.'

'Please don't stop.' Martrace said. 'You have not finished yet. How did you manage to get away from her in the end and come and live in this funny little house?'

'Ah. that was something.' Miss. Darling said. 'I was proud of that.'

'Tell me.' Martrace said.

'Well.' Miss. Darling said. 'When I got my teacher's job. The aunt told me I owed her a lot of money. I asked her why. She spoke. 'Because I've been feeding you for all these years and buying your shoes and your clothes!' She told me it added up to thousands and I had to pay her back by giving her my salary for the next ten years. I will give you one pound a week pocket money.' she said. 'But that's all you're going to get.' She even arranged with the school authorities to have my salary paid directly into her bank. She made me sign the paper.'

'You shouldn't have done that.' Martrace said. 'Your salary was your chance of freedom.'

'I know. I know.' Miss. Darling said. 'But by then I had been her slave all my life and I had not the courage or the guts to say no.'

I was still petrified of her. She could still hurt me badly.'

'So how did you manage to escape?' Martrace asked.

'Ah.' Miss. Darling said, smiling for the first time. 'That was two years ago. It was my greatest triumph.'

'Please tell me.' Martrace said.

'I used to get up exceedingly early and go for walks while my aunt was still asleep.' Miss. Darling said. 'And one day I came across this tiny cottage. It was empty. I found out who owned it. It was a farmer. I went to see him. Farmers also get up exceedingly early. He was milking his cows. I asked him if I could rent his cottage. 'You can't live there!' he cried. It is no convenience. no running water; no nothing!' '

'I want to live there.' I spoke. I am romantic. I have fallen in love with it. Please lend it to me.'

‘You're mad.’ he said. ‘But if you insist. You're welcome to it. The rent will be ten pence a week.’

‘Here's one month's rent in advance.’ I spoke, giving him 40p. ‘And thank you so much!’

‘How super!’ Martrace cried. ‘So suddenly you had a house all your own! But how did you pluck up the courage to tell the aunt?’

‘That was tough.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I steeled myself to do it. One night, after I had cooked her supper, I went upstairs and packed the few things I possessed in a cardboard box and came downstairs and announced I was leaving. I've rented a house.’ I spoke.

‘My aunt exploded. ‘Rent a house!’ she shouted. ‘How can you rent a house when you have only one pound a week in the world?’

‘I have done it.’ I spoke.

‘And how are you going to buy food for yourself?’

‘I will manage.’ I mumbled and rushed out of the front door.’ ‘Oh, well, done you!’ Martrace cried. ‘So, you were free at last!’

‘I was free at last.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I can't tell you how wonderful it was.’

‘But have you managed to live here on one pound a week for two years?’ Martrace asked.

‘I most certainly have.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I pay ten pence rent. And the rest buys me paraffin for my stove and my lamp and a little milk and tea and bread and margarine. That is all I need really. As I told you. I have a jolly good tuck-in at the school lunch.’

Martrace stared at her. What a marvelously brave thing Miss. Darling had done. Suddenly she was a hero in Martrace's eyes. ‘Isn't it awfully cold in the winter?’ she asked.

‘I've got my little paraffin stove.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘You'd be surprised how snug I can make it in here.’

‘Do you have a bed? Miss. Darling?’

‘Well not exactly.’ Miss. Darling said, smiling again. ‘But they say it's extremely healthy to sleep on a solid surface.’

All at once, Martrace was able to see the whole situation with absolute clarity. Miss. Darling needed help. There was no way she could go on existing like this indefinitely. 'You would be a lot better off, Miss. Darling,' she said. 'If you gave up your job and drew unemployment money.'

'I would never do that,' Miss. Darling said. 'I love teaching.'

'This awful aunt,' Martrace said. 'I suppose she is still living in your lovely old house?'

'Very much so,' Miss. Darling said. 'She's still only about fifty.

She will be around for a long time yet.'

'And do you think your father meant her to own the house forever?'

'I'm quite sure he didn't,' Miss. Darling said. 'Parents will often give a guardian the right to occupy the house for a certain length of time, but it is always left in trust for the child. It then becomes the child's property when he or she grows up.'

'Then surely it is your house?' Martrace said.

'My father's will be never found,' Miss. Darling said. 'It looks as though somebody destroyed it.' 'No prizes for guessing who,' Martrace said.

'No prizes,' Miss. Darling said.

'But if there is no will, Miss. Darling, then surely the house goes automatically to you. You are the next of kin.'

'I know I am,' Miss. Darling said. 'But my aunt produced a piece of paper written by my father saying that he leaves the house to his sister-in-law in return for her kindness in looking after me. I am certain it is a forgery. But no one can prove it.'

'Couldn't you try?' Martrace said. 'Couldn't you hire a good lawyer and make a fight of it.'

'I don't have the money to do that,' Miss. Darling said. 'And you must remember that this aunt of mine is a much-respected figure in the community. She has a lot of influence.'

‘Who is she?’ Martrace asked.

Miss. Darling hesitated a moment. Then she said softly.

‘Miss. Mcfarts.’

The Names

‘Miss. Mcfarts!’ Martrace cried, jumping about a foot in the air. ‘You mean she is your aunt? She brought you up?’

‘Yes.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘No wonder you were terrified!’ Martrace cried. ‘The other day we saw her grab a girl by the pigtails and throw her over the playground fence!’

‘You haven’t seen anything.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘After my father died, when I was five and a half. She used to make me bathe myself all alone. And if she came up and thought I had not washed properly she would push my head under the water and hold it there. But do not get me started on what she used to do. That will not help us at all.’

‘No.’ Martrace said. ‘It won’t.’

‘We came here.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘to talk about you and I have been talking about nothing but myself the whole time. I feel like a fool. I am much more interested in just how much you can do with those amazing eyes of yours.’

‘I can move things.’ Martrace said. ‘I know I can. I can push things over.’

‘How would you like it.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘If we made some overly cautious experiments to see just how much you can move and push?’

Quite surprisingly. Martrace said. ‘If you do not mind. Miss. Darling. I think I would rather not. I want to go home now and think and think about all the things I have heard this afternoon.’

Miss. Darling stood up at once. ‘Of course.’ she said. ‘I have kept you here far too long. Your mother will be starting to worry.’

‘She never does that.’ Martrace said, smiling. ‘But I would like to go home now, please. if you do not mind.’

‘Come along then.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I’m sorry I gave you such rotten tea.’

‘You didn’t at all.’ Martrace said. ‘I loved it.’

The two of them walked to Martrace’s house in complete silence. Miss. Darling sensed that Martrace wanted it that way. The child seemed so lost in thought she hardly looked where she was walking, and when they reached the gate of Martrace’s home. Miss. Darling said. ‘You had better forget everything I told you this afternoon.’

‘I won’t promise to do that.’ Martrace said. ‘But I will promise not to talk about it to anyone anymore. not even to you.’

‘I think that would be wise.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I will not promise to stop thinking about it, though. Miss. Darling.’ Martrace said. ‘I’ve been thinking about it back from your cottage and I’ve got just a tiny little bit of an idea.’

‘You mustn’t.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Please forget it.’

‘I would like to ask you three last things before I stop talking about it.’ Martrace said. ‘Please, will you answer them? Miss. Darling?’

Miss. Darling smiled. It was extraordinary, she told herself, how this little snippet of a girl was suddenly taking charge of her problems, and with such authority, too. ‘Well,’ she said. ‘That depends on what the questions are.’

‘The first thing is this.’ Martrace said. ‘What did Miss. Mcfarts call your father when they were around the house at home?’

‘I’m sure she called him Magnus.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That was his first name.’

‘And what did your father call Miss. Mcfarts?’

‘Her name is Agatha.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘That’s what he would have called her.’

‘And lastly.’ Martrace said. ‘What did your father and Miss. Mcfarts call you around the house?’

‘They called me Jenny.’ Miss. Darling said.

Martrace pondered these answers very carefully. 'Let me make sure I've got them right,' she said. 'In the house at home. Your father was Magnus. Miss. Mcfarts was Agatha, and you were Jenny. Am I right?'

'That is correct,' Miss. Darling said.

'Thank you,' Martrace said. 'And now I won't mention the subject anymore.'

Miss. Darling wondered what was going on in the mind of this child. 'Don't do anything silly,' she said.

Martrace laughed and turned away and ran up the path to her front door, calling out as she went. 'Good-bye, Miss.'

Darling! Thank you so much for the tea.'

(The Practice)

Martrace found the house empty as usual. Her father was not yet back from work. Her mother was not yet back from bingo and her brother might be anywhere. She went straight into the living room and opened the drawer of the sideboard where she knew her father kept a box of cigars. She took one out and carried it up to her bedroom and shut herself in.

Now for practice, she told herself. It is going to be tough, but I am determined to do it.

Her plan for helping Miss. Darling was beginning to form beautifully in her mind. She had it now in every detail. But in the end, it all depended upon her being able to do one incredibly special thing with her eye-power. She knew she would not manage it right away, but she felt confident with a great deal of practice and effort. She would succeed in the end. The cigar was essential. It was a bit thicker than she would have liked, but the weight was about right. It would be fine to practice with.

There was a small dressing-table in Martrace's bedroom with her hairbrush and comb on it and two library books. She cleared these things to one side and laid the cigar down in the middle of the dressing-table. Then she walked away and sat at the end of her bed. She was now about ten feet from the cigar.

She settled herself and began to concentrate, and very quickly this time she felt the electricity beginning to flow inside her head, gathering itself behind the eyes, and the eyes became hot and

millions of tiny invisible hands began pushing out like sparks towards the cigar. 'Move!' she whispered. and to her intense surprise. at once. The cigar with its little red and gold paper band around its middle rolled away across the top of the dressing-table and fell onto the carpet.

Martrace enjoyed that. It was lovely doing it. It had felt as though sparks were going round and round inside her head and flashing out of her eyes. It had given her a sense of power that was almost ethereal. And how quick it had been this time! How simple!

She crossed the bedroom, picked up the cigar, and put it back on the table.

Now for the difficult one. she thought. But if I have the power to push. then surely, I also have the power to lift. I must learn how to lift it. I must learn how to lift it right up into the air and keep it there. It is not a very heavy thing. a cigar.

She sat at the end of the bed and started again. It was easy now to summon up the power behind her eyes. It was like pushing a trigger in the brain. 'Lift!' she whispered. 'Lift! Lift!'

At first, the cigar started to roll away. But then. with Martrace concentrating fiercely. one end of it slowly lifted about an inch off the tabletop.

With a colossal effort. She managed to hold it there for about ten seconds. Then it fell back again.

'Phew!' she gasped. 'I am getting it! I am starting to do it!'

For the next hour. Martrace kept practicing. and in the end, she had managed. by the sheer power of her eyes. to lift the whole cigar, clear off the table about six inches into the air and hold it there for about a minute. Then suddenly she was so exhausted she fell back on the bed and went to sleep.

That was how her mother found her later in the evening.

'What's the matter with you?' the mother said. waking her up. 'Are you ill?'

'Oh gosh.' Martrace said. sitting up and looking around. 'No. I am all right. I was a bit tired. That is all.'

From then on. every day after school. Martrace shut herself in her room and practiced with the cigar. And soon it all began to come together most wonderfully. Six days later. by the following Wednesday

evening. She was able not only to lift the cigar up into the air but also to move it around exactly as she wished. It was beautiful. 'I can do it!' she cried. 'I can do it! I can pick the cigar up just with my eye power and push it and pull it in the air any way I want!'

All she had to do now was to put her great plan into action.

(The Third Miracle)

The next day was Thursday. and that. as the whole of Miss. Darling's class knew. was the day on which the Headmistress would take charge of the first lesson after lunch.

In the morning Miss. Darling said to them. 'One or two of you did not particularly enjoy the last occasion when the Headmistress took the class; so, let us all try to be especially careful and clever today.

How are your ears? Jennie. after your last encounter with Miss. Mcfarts?'

'She stretched them.' Jennie said. 'My mother said she's positive they are bigger than they were.'

'And Graceie.' Miss. Darling said. 'I am glad to see you didn't lose any of your hair after last Thursday.'

'My head was jolly sore afterward.' Graceie said.

'And you. Tom.' Miss. Darling said. 'Do please try not to be smart aleck with the Headmistress today. You were quite cheeky to her last week.' 'I hate her.' Tom said.

'Try not to make it so obvious.' Miss. Darling said. 'It does not pay. She is an extraordinarily strong woman. She has muscles like steel ropes.'

'I wish I were grown up.' Tom said. 'I'd knock her flat.'

'I doubt you would.' Miss. Darling said. "No one has ever got the better of her yet.'

'What will she be testing us on this afternoon?' a small girl asked.

'Almost certainly the three-times table.' Miss. Darling said.

‘That's what you are all meant to have learned this past week.

Make sure you know it.’

Lunch came and went.

After lunch, the class reassembled. Miss. Darling stood at one side of the room. They all sat silent, apprehensive, waiting. And then, like some giant of doom. The enormous Mcfarts strode into the room in her green breeches and cotton smock. She went straight to her jug of water and lifted it by the handle and peered inside.

‘I am glad to see.’ she said. ‘That there are no slimy creatures in my drinking-water this time. If there had been. Then something exceptionally unpleasant would have happened to every single member of this class. And that includes you, Miss. Darling.’

The class remained silent and very tense. They had learned a bit about this tigress by now and nobody was about to take any chances.

‘Very well.’ boomed the Mcfarts. ‘Let us see how well you know your three-times table. Or to put it another way, let us see how badly Miss. Darling has taught you the three-times table.’ The Mcfarts were standing in front of the class, legs apart, hands-on-hips, scowling at Miss. Darling stood silent to one side.

Martrace, sitting motionless at her desk in the second row, was watching things very closely.

‘You!’ the Mcfarts shouted, pointing a finger, the size of a rolling-pin at a boy called will Edward; will Edward was on the extreme right of the front row. ‘Stand up, you!’ she shouted at him.

Will Edward have stood up?

‘Recite the three-times table backward!’ the Mcfarts barked.

‘Backwards?’ stammered will Edward. ‘But I haven't learned it backward.’

‘There you are!’ cried the Mcfarts, triumphant. ‘She's taught you nothing! Miss. Darling, why have you taught them absolutely nothing at all in the last week?’

‘That is not true. Principal.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘They have all learned their three-times table. But I see no point in teaching them backward. There is little point in teaching anything backward. The whole object of life. Principal. is to go forward. I venture to ask whether even you. for example. can spell a simple word like wrong backward straight away. I very much doubt it.’

‘Don’t you get impertinent with me? Miss. Darling!’ the Mcfarts snapped. Then she turned back to the unfortunate will of Edward. ‘Very well. boy.’ she said. ‘Answer me this. I have seven apples. seven oranges and seven bananas. How many pieces of fruit do I have altogether? Hurry up! Get on with it!’

Give me the answer!’

‘That’s adding up!’ will Edward cry. ‘That isn’t the three times table!’

‘You are blithering idiot!’ shouted the Mcfarts. You are festering gumboil! You were- a flea-bitten fungus! That is the three times table! You have three separate lots of fruit, and each lot has seven pieces. Three sevens are twenty-one. Can’t you see that? Your stagnant cesspool! I will give you one more chance. I have eight coconuts. eight monkey-nuts and eight nutty little idiots like you. How many nuts do I have altogether? Answer me quickly.’

Poor Edward was properly flustered. ‘Wait!’ he cried. ‘Please wait! I must add up eight coconuts and eight monkey-nuts...’ He started counting on his fingers.

‘You are bursting blister!’ yelled the Mcfarts. ‘You motheaten maggot! This is not adding up! This is multiplication! The answer is three eights! Or is it eight threes? What is the difference between the three eights and eight threes? Tell me that. You mangled a little while and look sharp about it!’

By now Edward was far too frightened and bewildered even to speak.

In two strides the Mcfarts was beside him. and buy some amazing gymnastic tricks. It may have been judo or karate. She flipped the back of Edward’s legs with one of her feet so that the boy shot up off the ground and turned a somersault in the air. But halfway through the somersault she caught him by an ankle and held him dangling upside-down like a plucked chicken in a shop window.

‘Eight threes.’ the Mcfarts shouted. swinging Edward from side to side with his ankle. ‘Eight threes are the same as three eights and three eights are twenty-four! Repeat that!’

At exactly that moment Tom. at the other end of the room.

Jumped to his feet and started pointing excitedly at the blackboard and screaming. ‘The chalk! The chalk! Look at the chalk! It is moving all on its own!’

So, hostel...

l and shrill was Tom's scream that everyone in the place, including the Mcfarts, looked up at the blackboard. And there. sure enough. a brand-new piece of chalk was hovering near the grey-black writing surface of the blackboard.

‘It's writing something!’ screamed Tom. ‘The chalk is writing something!’

And indeed. it was.

‘What the blazes are this?’ Yelled the Mcfarts. It had shaken her to see her first name written like that by an invisible hand. She dropped Edward onto the floor.

Then she yelled at nobody. "Who's doing this?

Who is writing it?

The chalk continued to write.

Everyone in the place heard the gasp that came from the Mcfarts's throat. ‘No!’ she cried. ‘It cannot be! It cannot be Magnus!’

Miss. Darling. at the side of the room glanced swiftly at Martrace.

The child was sitting very straight at her desk. the head held high. the mouth compressed. the eyes glittering like two stars.

For some reason, everyone now looked at the Mcfarts. The woman's face had turned white as snow and her mouth was opening and shutting like a halibut out of the water and giving out a series of strangled gasps.

The chalk stopped writing. It hovered for a few moments. then suddenly it dropped to the floor with a tinkle and broke in two.

will Edward, who had managed to resume his seat in the front row? screamed. 'Miss. Mcfarts has fallen! Miss. Mcfarts is on the floor!'

This was the most sensational bit of news of all, and the entire class jumped up out of their seats to have a good look. And there she was, the huge figure of the Headmistress, stretched full-length on her back across the floor, out for the count.

Miss. Darling ran forward and knelt beside the prostrate giant. 'She's fainted!' she cried. 'She's out cold! Someone fetches the matron at once.' Three children ran out of the room.

Tom, always ready for action, leaped up and seized the big jug of water. 'My father says chilly water is the best way to wake up someone who's fainted,' he said, and with that, he tipped the entire contents of the jug over the Mcfarts's head. No one, not even Miss. Darling, protested.

As for Martrace, she continued to sit motionless at her desk. She was feeling curiously elated. She felt as though she had touched something that was not of this world, the highest point of the heavens, the farthest star. She had felt most wonderfully the power surging up behind her eyes, gushing like a warm fluid inside her skull, and her eyes had become scorching hot, hotter than ever before, and things had come bursting out of her eye-sockets and then the piece of chalk had lifted itself and had begun to write. She had hardly done anything. It had all been so simple.

The school matron, followed by five teachers, three women and two men, came rushing into the room.

'By golly, somebody has floored her at last!' cried one of the men, grinning. 'Congratulations, Miss. Darling!' 'Who threw the water over her?' asked the matron.

'I did,' said Tom proudly.

'Good for you,' another teacher said. 'Intend to get some more?'

'Stop that,' the matron said. 'We must carry her up to the sickroom.'

It took all five teachers and the matron to lift the enormous woman and stagger with her out of the room.

Miss. Darling said to the class. 'I think you'd all better go out to the playground and amuse yourselves until the next lesson.' Then

she turned and walked over to the blackboard and carefully wiped out all the chalk writing.

The children began filing out of the classroom. Martrace started to go with them. but as she passed Miss. Darling, she paused and her twinkling eyes met the teacher's eyes, and Miss. Darling ran forward and gave the tiny child a great big hug and a kiss.

A New Home

Later that day. the news began to spread that the Headmistress had recovered from her fainting-fit and had then marched out of the school building tight-lipped and white in the face.

The next morning, she did not turn up at school. At lunchtime. Mr. Trilby. the Deputy Head. telephoned her house to inquire if she was feeling unwell. There was no answer to the phone.

When school was over. Mr. Trilby decided to investigate further. So, he walked to the house where Miss. Mcfarts lived on the edge of the village. the lovely small red-brick Georgian building is known as The Red House. tucked away in the woods behind the hills.

He rang the bell. No answer.

He knocked loudly. No answer.

He called out. 'Is anybody at home?' No answer.

He tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He went in.

The house was silent and there was no one in it. and yet all the furniture was still in place. Mr. Trilby went upstairs to the main bedroom. Here also everything was normal until he started opening drawers and looking into cupboards.

There were no clothes, underclothes, or shoes anywhere.

They had all gone.

She has done a bunk. Mr. Trilby said to himself, and he went away to inform the school Governors that the Headmistress had vanished.

On the second morning. Miss. Darling received by registered post a letter from a firm of local solicitors informing her that the last will of her late father. Dr. Darling. had suddenly and

mysteriously turned up. This document revealed that ever since her father's death, Miss. Darling had been the rightful owner of a property on the edge of the village known as The Red House. Which until recently had been occupied by Miss Agatha Mcfarts. This will also show her father's lifetime savings. Fortunately, we are still safely in the bank. had also been left to her. The solicitor's letter added that if Miss. Darling would kindly call into the office as soon as possible. Then the property and the money could be transferred into her name very rapidly.

Miss. Darling did just that, and within a couple of weeks, she had moved into the Red House, the very place in which she had been brought up and where luckily all the family furniture and pictures were still around. From then on, Martrace was a welcome visitor to The Red House every single evening after school, and a close friendship began to develop between the teacher and the small child.

Back at school, Momentous changes were also taking place. As soon as it became clear that Miss. Mcfarts had completely disappeared from the scene. The excellent Mr. Trilby was appointed Head Teacher in her place. And very soon after that, Martrace was moved up into the top form where Miss. Plimsoll quickly discovered that this amazing child was every bit as bright as Miss. Darling had said.

One evening a few weeks later, Martrace was having tea with Miss. Darling in the kitchen of The Red House after school as they always did, when Martrace said suddenly, 'Something strange has happened to me, Miss. Darling.'

'Tell me about it,' Miss. Darling said.

'This morning,' Martrace said, 'Just for fun I tried to push something over with my eyes and I could not do it. Nothing moved. I did not even feel the heat building up behind my eyeballs. The power had gone. I think I have lost it completely.'

Miss. Darling carefully buttered a slice of brown bread and put a little strawberry jam on it. 'I've been expecting something like that to happen,' she said.

'You have? Why?,' Martrace asked.

'Well,' Miss. Darling said, 'It is only a guess, but here is what I think. While you were in my class you had nothing to do, nothing to make you struggle. Your enormous brain was going crazy with frustration. It was bubbling and boiling away like mad inside your head. There was tremendous energy bottled up in there with nowhere to

go, and somehow or other you were able to shoot that energy out through your eyes and make objects move. But now things are different. You are in the top form competing against children more than twice your age and all that mental energy is being used up in class. Your brain is for the first time having to struggle and strive and keep busy, which is great. That is only a theory, mind you, and it may be a silly one, but I do not think it is far off the mark.'

'I'm glad it's happened,' Martrace said. 'I wouldn't want to go through life as a miracle-worker.'

'You've done enough,' Miss. Darling said. 'I can still hardly believe you made all this happen for me.'

Martrace, who was perched on a high stool at the kitchen table? ate her bread and jam slowly. She did so love these afternoons with Miss. Darling. She felt completely comfortable in her presence, and the two of them talked to each other for generations.

'Did you know?' Martrace said suddenly. 'That the heart of a mouse beats at the rate of six hundred and fifty times a second?'

'I did not,' Miss. Darling said smiling. 'How fascinating. Where did you read that?'

'In a book from the library,' Martrace said. 'And that means it goes so fast you cannot even hear the separate beats. It must sound just like a buzz.'

'It must,' Miss. Darling said.

'And how fast do you think a hedgehog's heart beats?'

Martrace asked.

'Tell me,' Miss. Darling said, smiling again.

'It's not as fast as a mouse,' Martrace said. 'It is three hundred times a minute. But even so. You would not have thought it went as fast as that of a creature that moves so slowly. Would you, Miss. Darling?'

'I certainly wouldn't,' Miss. Darling said. 'Tell me one more.'

'A horse,' Martrace said. 'That's slow. It is only forty times a minute.'

This child, Miss. Darling told herself, seems to be interested in everything. When one is with her it is impossible to be bored. I love it.

The two of them stayed sitting and talking in the kitchen for an hour or so longer, and then, at about six o'clock, Martrace said goodnight and set out to walk home to her parents' house, which was about an eight-minute journey away. When she arrived at her gate, she saw a large black Mercedes motorcar parked outside. She did not take too much notice of that. There were often strange cars parked outside her father's place. But when she entered the house, she was confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Her mother and father were both in the hall frantically stuffing clothing and various objects into suitcases.

'What on earth's going on?' she cried. 'What's happening, daddy?'

'We're off,' Mr. Dicksnoter said, not looking up. 'We're leaving for the airport in half an hour, so you'd better get packed. Your brother's upstairs already to go. Get a move on, girl! Get going!'

'Off?' Martrace cried out. 'Where to?'

'Spain,' the father said. 'It's a better climate than this lousy country.'

'Spain!' Martrace cried. 'I do not want to go to Spain! I love it here and I love my school!'

'Just do as you're told and stop arguing,' the father snapped. 'I've got enough troubles without messing about with you!'

'But daddy,' Martrace began.

'Shut up!' the father shouted. 'We're leaving in thirty minutes!'

I am not Missing that plane!'

'But how long for, daddy?' Martrace cried. 'When are we coming back?'

'We aren't,' the father said. 'Now beat it! I am busy!'

Martrace turned away from him and walked out through the open front door. As soon as she was on the road she began to run. She headed straight back towards Miss. Darling's house, and she reached it in less than four minutes. She flew up the drive and suddenly

she saw Miss. Darling in the front garden. standing in the middle of a bed of roses doing something with a pair of clippers. Miss. Darling had heard Martrace's feet racing over the gravel and now she straightened up and turned and stepped out of the rose-bed as the child came running up.

‘My. me!’ she said. ‘What in the world is the matter?’

Martrace stood before her. panting. out of breath. Her small face flushed crimson all over.

‘They're leaving!’ she cried. ‘They've all gone mad and they're filling their suitcases and they're leaving for Spain in about thirty minutes!’

‘Who is?’ Miss. Darling asked quietly.

‘Mummy and daddy and my brother Mike and they say I've got to go with them!’

‘You mean for a holiday?’ Miss. Darling asked.

‘Forever!’ Martrace cried. ‘Daddy said we were never coming back!’

There was a brief silence. then Miss. Darling said. ‘Actually, I'm not incredibly surprised.’

‘You mean you knew they were going?’ Martrace cried.

‘Why didn't you tell me?’

‘No. darling.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I did not know they were going.’

But the news still does not surprise me.’

‘Why?’ Martrace cried. ‘Please tell me why.’ She was still out of breath from the running and the shock of it all.

‘Because of your father.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘Is in with a bunch of crooks. Everyone in the village knows that. He is a receiver of stolen cars from all over the country. He is in it deep.’ Martrace stared at her open-mouthed.

Miss. Darling went on. ‘People brought stolen cars to your father's workshop where he changed the number-plates and resprayed the bodies and assorted color and all the rest of it.’

-And-

‘Now somebody has tipped him off that the police are on him, and he is doing what they all do. running off to Spain where they cannot get him. He will have been sending his money out there for years. all ready and waiting for him to arrive.’

They were standing on the lawn in front of the lovely redbrick house with its weathered old red tiles and its tall chimneys. and Miss. Darling still had the pair of garden clippers in one hand. It was a warm golden evening, and a blackbird was singing somewhere nearby.

‘I don't want to go with them!’ Martrace shouted suddenly.

‘I won't go with them.’

‘I'm afraid you must.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘I want to live here with you.’ Martrace cried out. ‘Please let me live here with you!’

‘I only wish you could.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘But I am afraid it is not possible. You cannot leave your parents just because you want to. They have a right to take you with them.’

20

‘But what if they agreed?’ Martrace cried eagerly. ‘What if they said yes. Can I stay with you? Would you let me stay with you then?’

Miss. Darling said softly. ‘Yes. that would be heaven.’

‘Well. I think they might!’ Martrace cried. ‘I honestly think they might! They do not care tuppence about me!’ ‘Not so fast.’ Miss. Darling said.

‘We've got to be fast!’ Martrace cried. ‘They're leaving any moment! Come on!’ she shouted, grasping Miss. Darling's hand. ‘Please come with me and ask them! But we will have to hurry! We will have to run!’

The next moment the two of them were running down the drive together and then out onto the road. and Martrace was ahead. pulling Miss. Darling after her by her wrist. and it was a wild and wonderful dash they made along the country lane and through the village to the house where Martrace's parents lived. The big black

Mercedes was still outside and now its boot, and all its doors were open, and Mr. and Ms. Dicksnoter and the brother were scurrying around it like ants, piling in the suitcases. as Martrace and Miss. Darling came dashing up.

‘Daddy and mummy!’ Martrace burst out, gasping for breath. ‘I do not want to go with you! I want to stay here and live with Miss.

Darling and she says that I can but only if you permit me! Please say yes! Go on, daddy, say absolutely!

Say yes, mummy!’

The father turned and looked at Miss. Darling. ‘You’re that teacher woman who once came here to see me, aren’t you?’ he said. Then he went back to put the suitcases into the car.

His wife said to him. ‘This one will have to go on the back seat.

There is no more room in the boot.’

‘I would love to have Martrace.’ Miss. Darling said. ‘I would look after her with loving care. Mr. Dicksnoter, and I would pay for everything. She would not cost you a penny. But it was not my idea. It was Martrace’s. And I will not agree to take her without your full and willing consent.’

‘Come on, Harry.’ the mother said, pushing a suitcase into the back seat. ‘Why don’t we let her go if that is what she wants. It will be one less time to look after.’

‘I’m in a hurry.’ the father said. ‘I have a plane to catch. If she wants to stay, let her stay. It is fine with me.’

Martrace leaped into Miss. Darling’s arms and hugged her, and Miss. Darling hugged her back, and then the mother, father, and brother were inside the car and the car was pulling away with the tires screaming.

The brother gave a wave through the rear window, but the other two did not even look back. Miss. Darling was still hugging the tiny girl in her arms and neither of them said a word as they stood there watching the big black car tearing around the corner at the end of the road and disappearing forever into the distance.

Martrace ‘Hope’... got all she ever wanted...

<3

Interval: 6 Dear Diary

1

Maiara Chenoa was the mom of a child named Bryana.
'Taking her the way I did was not something I wanted to do, yet being a fallen angel, that is what I must do.'

~Nevaeh~

Clash- The story of Maggie's grandparents.

1

Dear Diary,

I am so frightened; I can hardly hold this pen. I am printing rather than writing in cursive because that way I have more control.

What am I terrified of; you ask?

HER!

You can see how shaky even my printing is. Suppose my hands shake like this when I go in to see the other girl.

I am being selfish, I know, in just talking about what is going...

'My brain is slow this time of day.'

He stood by the window and sipped his coffee. The view over the not so spectacular- was feeling just as dead as him on the inside.

About enough of it all. I have had about enough! Enough of this place and simply cannot take it any longer, it was time to see her.

I look around me and see gray walls of concrete covering the entire perimeter of the room.

An iron-wired bunk bed occupies the far-left corner of the room with one white pillow and a white blanket on the top bunk. On the top right of the wall is a window. It is the only light aside from the brightness of the white linens, the only connection to the outside world.

I would try to use the window to escape, but they put up bars to prevent that from happening.

Again...

Right now, I am sitting on the cemented bench by the wooden door across from the bed, staring at the wall. The room, in general, is cold, damp, and dark, but it is better than what I used to call home.

Aside from that, I just cannot take it any longer, but, honestly, what can I do? I have tried..., only to fail. Once I even tried dressing up as one of the guards, but I was caught and the result...was not at all a pretty sight. I never imagined getting lost inside my head. There are always stories about those that cannot get away. But I was always one of those who could. I could escape and live again, but my mother had warned me that one day, I might not come back. I should have listened to her warning. It started just like any other. I pushed through the darkness, sure that I would come back. I watched the nightmares flow past and laughed at their fear.

A chill suddenly ran down my spine that made me feel like I was about to die. That draws my attention to only one thought was her.

There was a fight last night with my wife I knew- she did not- I got it- she did not. (Her plan to kill me... I did not know) I get into my car 1953 Chevy in the color of green, dread for the long trip I must make, it a job that I must have, or I lost everything and to see my younger girl over the way that the wifey knows about as of last night... it is time to go- the moonlight my way. The kiss there is her problem now- I have a 2nd family over in Ca. I live in Cresson Pa, where what is- like- under the ground is more substantial than what is above it.

I hear the worrying of the old motor- the car is only 5 years old but has seen lots of these trips 45 if you well over and back to get it in and out. The trip started nice and slow- like they all do I have made this lots of times as I said, my woman no's this too- she knows all about me yet nothing about me. We see me the man behind the wall, looking for his young lost to be there at the end of this trip, and for a new life- where she does not blow everything- and shove it in my face. On the highway, the music starts to flow out- I hum to it.

2

I make the pass around cars- as you do on the road when on a deadline... All types of lines time, dead, and past- I think that now. Like roadkill in-between the yellow lines! Sights- sounds- flying

by doing 40. Town's- homes- life going by- in a haze- as the sun comes up over the hilltops.

Trees- bending over too as the car rushes by them. The wind in his hair, with it down- he was loving life... not his wife!

F-U he said looking at the photos! See the wheels spinning in the stop and go... one hand on the wheel- sunglass is now in his middle age head. The black hairs dyed and slicked back... like a mid-life circus ass hole- that was trying to get young ass in his pants- and that he did- he scored a hot young thing only 15.

The same age as his little girl at home... sick they said.

Yet it did not matter to him.

Between two hills the game started, going up the grade... the truck was pulling a boxcar. Big have- hauling ass!

Room!

3

The Jake brake was letting it all out too slow for me! The clash was on! Looking at the time on the dash- it is now 9 am. which was 8:59 on his hand which and that was pissing him off that it was not right for the other- I need to change what he said. Looking at the speedometer the man sees the speed up taking place... the first pass was made by me 'this man is killing me- I have to get there on time- to see- see my baby and have a job- my- my boss is going to- kill my ass if not!'

The truck big red, 32 headlights- big mean grill- coming for me- and piss- as it runs me off the road some- and this game was like this for 5 miles! Back and forth this went smashing into me... bumper-to-bumper- hit- kicking and pulling on my old sheet metal!

4

Grinding and twisting, jerking, and twitching! Pressing down on my left foot on the gas- fast- fast- I say- he wants to KILL me! I saw it in the eyes behind me now, that he was chasing me down- wanting me to pass- yet if I do pass- and get in front he was to make me the 8 balls on the pool table. 18 wells in my face kicking rocks and dust! Cracking the glass- of my car- what does he want with me? Doing 120- now I must be- I look and see 124. I see the smoky-ness out of the two pipes- just spewing blackness in the air- a joke he was me to breathe in!

The train next to us- is not even keeping up at this point, it was on the run the whole time- back and forth. 3 lane highway- with big dips and twists- I rack with- him and these cars- over and over- his not caring about anything- only doing the job and that is doing me in- I hear him say- to a woman on the phone when I stop to take a piss at this café 2 miles back. Getting gas and the man clawing all over my car trying to find money to be made- he said I need a new belt- it is going to snap- in less than 50 miles.

5

'Yah- Yah- Yah- if you say so!' The train is coming, and this truck keeps easing me onto the tracks... the car is hitting some on the one side... yet I get away going behind the last train car as the gate lifted some- he could not yet, I got ahead some and the dance start yet again- playing with me toying- if you well with my mind- asking me to pass and him- back and forth the game went for a night!

I got out at one point saying- 'just run me over!' that is what he wanted me to do- yet, that was not fun for this man- it was not enough he wanted me as road kill- the gears groaned- for him to star the movie on me standing there- my woman did this he said, it must have been played for him to do this with this souped-up diesel... it was going to be long and slow... all plant- the truck races from me as I scream profanities, he's doing 150- and the brakes come on just missing my head one be an inch or so... he said to get in the car- and duel me for your life!

Always risky to pass- he even said to, and I did and the oncoming car- hit me some- knocking me in the dirt and dust. Yet dust is all around in Ca, I ran over a cactus...?

He said confused... mouth bleeding and head thumping- his wife's photo falling in his lap- like it was telling him something. I see the train over there blowing its horn at the drive of this 1920's 18wheeler is he in on it too?

I questioned...?

Yes- Yes- Yes- it all for me to die! The road now is dart-gate put up I have no clue where I am at- so off my pathway that I know so well, the seat belt cutting into me as he makes another hit on the ass end of my car. The belt on the fan goes pud- pud- pud- I lose of freaking mind- the truck keeps creeping in on me slow like playing-tap- tap- tapping me up the hill- on this death road with no side rails. And there is the train- coming on to us as I land on the cross tracks- is it going to be me or him that gets hit? The train was coming, I saw it out the side window- and it was lights out for me- grinding me out!

Yes- Yes- Yes- My loving wife- My sweet- wife was the one, that did this... And this is me saying the story of the wife- the story of me saying that- I got you- baby!

Rot in hell! I will sleep with the guy in the truck now! The car went over the cliff next to the viaduct the train was nearing... and it all ended in an explosion!

Dear Diary- I never thought this would be the last thing I would say.

<3

(Back)

(Amend Time)

Enchanted Sea's

Oh, I remember them... all! All History and remember the world we had called Earth, yet I also remember the other world that I have made- exactly right next to us and then far away too- where love was love nothing nothing less, and hate was the height of passion.

Nevaeh- And then just like ripping out of a dream I am back in my bed, in my world, as little old-Nevaeh. And my life has much more meaning now, looking into someone else's.

It saved me from the sin of having fins.

And, that night- That night, I saved a mermaid.

Nevaeh- The shadow- that shows through- from within and then back out. On the walls and within me, and them alike, I feel all this power having a tool on me, 'Stamina is everything, that is energy and strength.' 'I got stamina- don't give up, I won't give up- I got stamina!'

Damen's within me is becoming ever so darker backing out my eyes, as I focus on mine all the time if I want my privacy or not, they see into me and out and looking into my eyes reflecting it see them within me, tricks me to listen, really listen to them all the time, like now you must hear me. More time has passed and all I have is recollections of all things lingering, I know that I am going to have to turn my power over to another woman, I then press my lips together and nod, my voice beaten by the one in my head influence- it, I already knew- whom it was: Tell you all that I am not crazy- I hear the voices too, said her 14 girls of trust!

She was never crazy at all, and it has made us closer- than ever, in aging as we ran these new worlds, along with this one.

I-Jaylynn- thought- Tell them all about what they cannot understand, they have taken over me, like her with their hex!

Quit stalling- I thought, yet they have my mind, and just get it over with!

Nevertheless, I do not, like- I do not say a word, anything but the feeling of traumatization going through me- of all the one before me- feeling their every emotion- mostly pain and evil. I just delay for her to endure so-o, I can delay even further, with the voices ripping through me, that is not taking over my mind. Over the fact- I want to take over my mother's place in this world, as it should be, and fight for her as I never did in the past. Though Jaylynn.

Even so, if you could see it as it is, you would not see that at all, they are so much more- yet you can see- in you investigate my mind deep and see when the outside evil all started- slipping in, and that is more than most.

(Remembrance of time formerly)

She beams, as though I just passed the world's easiest test of understanding.

'Really, yet now think about, that Chiaz Naztherth sounds about right, that I would give you, my life?'

Raise your hand, she nods, palms out, moving toward mine, feeling the sparks of link up with memories and transmitting them from one girl to the other.

Lifting my arm unhurriedly, carefully, figured out to evade all bodily contact when she says, 'Now tell me, what do you perceive?'

At once I just was, unsure what she was after with me doing this, then shrugging I said, 'Well, I see pale skin, long fingers, a freckle or two, nails in serious need of a manicure-this were you?'

Instead, you would see a group of fragments encompassing neutrons, protons, quarks, and electrons. And a young girl's life starting school, and then ever-so moving forward- yet look even closer than that.

And within those little quarks, down to the littlest idea, you would see zilch- but pure vibrating energy moving at a speed slow

enough, that it seems hard and solid, and yet, rapidly abundant, that it cannot be seen for what it is- oomph.

As she wrapped her fingers around the staff, she felt a small burst of electricity, a charge that tingled through her wrist and forearm. Ancient magic. Finally, she thought as she swam back out the way she had come in, she would get her revenge on those responsible for her parents' deaths: humans. I did not have to say good-bye. I was just beginning to say hello. I took a deep breath, and I kissed her lips. Lips once full of life, once full of love. Her eyes opened.

Having been an unwilling visitor here often enough, she did not bother to snoop around. Muddy old scrolls and portrait mosaics of her ancestors- were about as exciting as sand. And just as useful. Instead, she headed directly for her prize. Perched on a stand behind the king's desk, like a hydra waiting for the ocean current to whisk it away to a new home, stood the royal trident. It looked common, useless. Likewise, in the hands of a merperson of royal descent, it would wield great power.

It just so happened that Chiaz was a merperson of royal descent.

I bet I can renegotiate the streamers later.

Epilogue Deyanira Sanderson slipped through the open doorway to the king's office, her heart fluttering- kicking despite knowing that the palace guard had retired when Uncle Whelk went to bed a few hours ago.

Still, the thrill of danger coursed through her. It was not fear of getting caught- she would face whatever consequences the king threw her way- likewise excitement over what she was about to do. She had pulled a lot of crazy and daring stunts in her sixteen years, likewise, this was by far the boldest. He mewls, similar this is the biggest imposition ever.

Finally, he says, 'Okay, likewise no streamers on the handlebars. She would never live down the embarrassment.'

'Deal,' I say as I slip my hand into his and we start digging her out of the theme. 'She's safer than a wake-maker,' he counters.

He has a point.

'Okay,' I say, trying to be diplomatic, 'I'll learn to drive Princess on one condition.'

'Shoot.'

'I get to wear pink I could not help me.'

Not sure- to unbelievably, I narrow my eyes; never-mind the circumstance that she has been studying this stuff for hundreds of years, I feel now lost in small details- of dealing.

'Trust.' She said to me, enthusiastically.

Fully taken to the subject now, she leans toward me, saying remember is half the battle- isn't it?

'Seriously, ever- the insignificant person is diverse, and plays a role in all that is remembrances of the past.'

She did not say a word, only her eyes said, the emotion- (transporting- teleporting in a handheld)

Take my hand child, she said in an undertone.

'The whole thing is the same. Items that give the impression dense, like you and I, and this sand that we are sitting on- now, are just a mass of energy vibrating gradually enough to seem hard, while things like spirits and ghosts vibrate so quickly, they are unbearable for most humans to see- yet we can see it.'

~*~

'If you think I'm driving that death trap,' I say, 'then you're insane.'

'I see you,' I say, eager to remind her of all the time I used to spend with my ghostly image coming through.

I take one look at Princess, lying on her side with two trash cans and a mess of garbage piled around her, and cringe.

I laugh. 'You named your flying horse and chariot Princess?' 'What can I say?' he teases. 'I call all my favorite things princess.'

'I think I have met her, I think- I know that I have it was Lurleen, before- the total contrast of what she was remembered for-in this world.'

I investigated this world like a drunk through the past, as Jaylynn, yet ever since, heightened as if compressed, to amplify- the slightest, the lest- to the loftiness of vibrancy.

'Also, that is accurately why- you cannot see you anymore, do you know who you are now?' She nods- then she and her changed place once more, and she, at last, saw all thrown back refitted in her mother's eyes- of Emmah, the war over the hex.

I gazed at the water before us, the swells rolling under the bridge that was standing so high above, one after another. Endless, never-ending, immortal- like us.

'Or at least I used to, you know, before she overlapped the bridge and moved on- like all the others, I even seen the love for the girl before him too, the true love, of what is wrong- yet ever-so right.'

I want you to be with a girl named- Naddalin, be a girlfriend to her, she is like me in so many ways you will love her- I can see that too- for you. And she needs a new outlook on life now, and so do you.

'The vibration is moving too wildly. Though some can see past all of that.'

'Now raise your hand again and bring it so close to mine we just nearly touch and strike of bolts.'

Then just like that, the section was over for us both, and it was time to sit down and reflect on all things past. The witch has become my life and has been most of it as well. Then, now, and even in the future.

I did not want to stay away. I could not.'

'Woohoo!' He shouts, closes the distance between us, and lifts me into his arms, spinning us around. 'I knew it!'

Before I could respond with disbelief- he so obviously did not know if- he would sit me down and take my face in his hands. His lips are on their way to mine when he pulls back. 'Hey, I'm not about to set off another crazy magical bond again, am I?' Then, as if he just realized something, he says, 'Not that I am opposed or anything. I just want to be clear about what I am getting into.'

'No,' I say, trying to shake my head. 'No more bonds. You are immune now.' 'Okay,' he says. Then he finishes what he started.

His lips on mine feel so soft and warm and...perfect. Without hiding behind the magic of the bond- and with my feelings out in the open- I can recognize the true magic of our kiss. Olivia said once that love is the strongest magic in the world. Now I know he is right.

When he pulls back, his eyes glow with the love I know is shining inside. I am sure my eyes are glowing just as bright because I can feel the tears of joy sliding down my cheeks.

For several long minutes, we just smiled at each other.

I am sure we look similar stupidly in love teenagers- to Aunt- Rachel and whoever else happens to be watching- likewise, we know the truth. There is nothing stupid about it.

'My motorcycle, I loved it.'

'Now that you're back,' Olivia says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and leading me toward the driveway, 'I'm going to teach you to ride the Princess.'

'Princess?'

'For you,' I admit, every muscle in my heart panicked at the revelation. 'I came back because of you.'

'Yes?' He asks for his confused look softening with a smile that crinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Willing me not to faint before I can get the words out, I say, 'I love you, Olivia.' I missed the lip gloss,' I tease. As soon as I say it, I know it is the wrong thing.

This is not the time for joking. Not only do I feel sour inside, likewise the guarded look on 'That's a lie,' I confess.

He scowls in confusion. Strang, I reach into my pocket and pull out smoothing from my childhood, that I brought back with me, and looking at it as I do, and playing with it as the same as I did when I was a small girl around the age of five, no more one of the first things, that I bought, after finding a new home, it small and ticks, in my hand, has not been found in years.

Oddly enough it a pocket timepiece, silver in finish ornate engraving- with a gold time-worn train on embossed within the closure, I spin the time- to the last date of time on Earth, and pull the winder to stop it from sticking, as a reminder of all time past, as it was for me looking at it with childlike memories.

12:37 was the time...

Her attention shifts as the ringing stops. I can hear someone say something on the other end.

Chiaz asks, May I speak with Brody, please-?

There is a pause and then, it is Deyanira-

Holding her hand over the mouthpiece, she says to me, "His mother is fetching him- I smile.

Until she adds, you can leave now-

My first thought is to strangle her. Her attention is back on the phone: she would never see it coming. Likewise, that would leave Brody heartbroken by an unsevered bond.

I could not do that to him.

Besides, I do not have the energy to do it right.

In the end, I just brush my teeth, take a deep breath, and leave the room. Chaz slams the door behind me. If I ask nicely, Aunt Rachel will get me my line. Or, even better, a cell phone.

Though I can only imagine the cell phone company laughing when I bring in my soaking phone for a replacement.

I should just stick with the landline.

Suppressing the temptation to listen in on her conversation- if she Does not know how to dial a phone, she cannot understand about extensions- I head to my room and hold the door open for Jenny to join me. The traitor that she is, she is stationed outside the bathroom instead of following me-I am the one who feeds you, you know- She gives me a wistful look, similar she wishes she could be in two places at once, and then turns and presses her nose to the crack under the bathroom door.

- Fine- I swing the door shut behind me.

After retrieving my rain Chiaz pajamas from beneath my pillow and trading them for my towel wrap, I sit down at my desk

and pull-out markers and a blank sheet of paper. Using an exercise, we learned in first-year English, I fold the paper in half lengthwise and prepare to make a pro-and-cons list. I use a purple

marker to draw a line down the middle. Then I title each column and begin filling them in. Accept Saylin's Proposal to Reject Saylin's...

Proposal Duty Love...

Dad Aunt Rachel... My kingdom Me Legacy Future

Living up to my Discover new potential Responsibility
Dedication... The people of LASSINIA Olivia Leading my people
underwater-

Protecting my people from above- I am not sure what I had
hoped to accomplish by making this list.

I thought one side of the decision would far outweigh the
other and I would not have to fret about it anymore.

The truth is there are valid reasons for me to make either
choice.

The only difference is- it is a choice I have already made. I
am giving up my life and living on land, living with my human half,
and forging a future with the boy I love.

Without another thought, I crumpled the list and tossed it
into the trash. That is the end of that mental debate.

Then why do I still feel so adrift?

By lunch the next day, Chiaz and Brody are back in each
other's laps. By Wednesday afternoon I am ready to throw them both
back into

the ocean. If only the waters of south Florida were chilly
enough to cool them off.

When I stomp through the kitchen door after school and
find them sharing one of the dining chairs, I stomp right on through to
the living room before flinging my backpack to the ground.

I know this is what I wanted to happen, likewise Chiaz
Naztherth it all must be so in- my- face?

- Something wrong-? Saylin asks.

I glance- okay, glare- at the armchair where he has been
spending all his time since he got here on Monday. He has mentioned

his proposal a couple of times, likewise, he has not been pushing the issue.

- No, I snap-I mean, yes. Not really. I just-I shake my head.

- I do not need to see my baby cousin making all lovey-dovey with my ex-crush- I flop on the couch, jerk open the zipper on my bag, and pull out my SAT prep guide. Flipping it open to the next sample test, I slam it on the coffee table and slide it down onto the floor to begin.

- You have been spending a lot of your time with that book, Saylin Observes-May I ask why-? - Because, I explain, trying to scan the rules for the first section, even though I should have them memorized by now, the test is on Saturday and if I do not do well, then I will not get into college because my grades have been pitiful because until three weeks ago, I thought I did not need to worry about a future on land because I was going to become a mer queen and spend my years ruling over LASSINIA instead of studying literature and American Government-

A long silence fills the room after my mini rant.

Finally, Saylin laughs and says,

- Now tell me your true feelings-

I slump-I know it is not the most important thing in the world, I admit.

Things like war, famine, and ocean warming come to mind.

- likewise, if I want to protect the oceans in an official, scientific capacity, then I need higher education.

I cannot become a marine biologist without at least a college degree-

- You can help the oceans in another way, he says quietly.

I guess I should be thankful he has been quiet if he has.

He has been patiently waiting for the right moment. Now it is not that moment.

- Tell me why- I lay my pencil down in the open seam of the study guide-Why do you think this is such a great idea-?

- I told you why-

- You told me a reason, I argue-likewise I do not think you have told me your reason- Lurleen, Saylin says, sinking onto the floor next to me, you are the best hope for LASSINIA's future.

For the future freedom of all the mer kingdoms.

With our forces united, we will be able to enact positive change-

- This is everything you said before-

And everything that tugged at the lifetime of duty that Dad trained into me.

likewise, something is missing-You have another reason. I can sense it-

- You are wrong, he says with another laugh-I have been raised to honor duty before all else, just like you. I can imagine no better way to fulfill our duties than by joining our kingdoms for the greater good-

- I just do not think I can-

- You know that is why my father stopped speaking to you, right?

- What -? I jerk back-No. Why-?

- King Whelk wanted to enter us into an arranged marriage,

Saylin explains-My father disagreed. He wanted me to seek out my true love, my true mermate. When your father insisted, my severe relations.

- That's impossible- I shake my head, not able to wrap my mind around the idea of Dad wanting to sign my future away on a piece of paper. It seems so un-similar to him-It is not; Saylin Says-This is another reason my plan is a good one.

It is what your father has wanted all along- His gaze drifts toward the front door, likewise I can tell he is not seeing anything-As

difficult as it is for me to admit, my father was wrong in this. Our union can only be for the best of both our kingdoms-

He makes it seem so tempting. The fact that I am even considering the possibility is ridiculous. Likewise, similar we have always said- What if-?

- What if, Saylin says, jumping on my opening, we bonded and-

- What if who bonded?

- Olivia! -I jump at the sound of his voice. He walks into the living

room with a dark look on his face. And no wonder if he heard what Saylin and I were talking about.

- I thought you were at work-? I ask, hopefully not sounding- or looking- guilty.

- I was, he says flat there is a tropical storm coming in, so they closed the lumberyard- He throws Saylin a dark look-What if who bonded-? - It is just a game we used to play as guppies, I explain before Saylin can respond. He could only make the situation worse.

- One of us starts a what- if, and then we keep going down that path, alternating what-ifs until we get to a conclusion. Or we start laughing too hard to continue-

- A game, Olivia Echoes-So, in what- if are the two of you bonded-?

- It is just a-

Saylin interrupts-I commented on how funny it would be if we had bonded as children, he lies-We almost shared the first kiss once or twice, likewise, Lurleen was always the levelheaded one- He grins at me.

- Spurned my every advance-

I throw Saylin a grateful smile. Not that he and I were doing anything wrong, likewise still. My relationship with Olivia- our official boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, anyway- is still new. I do not want him to worry over something that would never happen.

Similarly, Saylin said I am too levelheaded to do anything so impulsive. Saylin, sensing the almost tangible tension in the room, stands, clears his throat, and excuses himself to the kitchen. Seconds later, he is fleeing the smooch fest he found there upstairs. Olivia, who has been standing, rigid and acting as the epicenter of all that anxiety, asks, what was that about?

- Nothing. I told you, we just-

- Save it, he says, cutting me off-I know you better than anyone. I can tell when you are lying to me-

- It is not a lie- Not really. We were playing a game and, even though for half a second, I might have thought about considering the idea, I was not serious. I insist We were playing a game.

He looks at me for a minute, studying, trying to see through my words to decide if I am Saying the truth.

Finally, he closes his eyes and shakes his head-Yeah, sorry. It has been a long day- I cross the room and wrap my arms around his waist -It has been a long month.

He gives me a quick hug and then leans back, nodding at the open study guide on the table-You want some help-?

- Of course, I say, grasping at the safe topic of my SAT prep. As he settles, cross-legged, on the floor across the table, I ask, are you going to distract me by playing footsie-?

- Absolutely, princess, he says with a wink.

- Then I will not remember a thing-

- It is a samurai training technique, he teases, spinning the test prep book toward him-I distract you as much as possible right now- He slides the book into his lap-And you will learn how to test through anything- Samurai, huh-? I tease back, relieved to return to our relaxed position-We will not get anything done-

He wins again and then gets down to business, reading the first question aloud.

My good humor evaporates as I focus on trying to figure out the parallel relationship between dog and quadruped.

- I am going to fail-

- You are not going to fail, Shannen replies patiently- you cannot fail the SATs- She signals a left turn, checks both ways, and then pulls out onto the street in front of the school. Her wipers swish back and forth against the tropical downpour... The worst you can get on each section is a two hundred, I think, likewise, they do not assign letter grades-

- Fine, I whine-I am going to get two hundred-

- You will not- She spares me a glance.

- You will do well in the reading and writing sections-

With a groan, I drop my head into my hands, knocking it against the dashboard on the way. I just groan again and sink deeper into my freak-out. I have not had enough time to prepare. I have wasted too much of what time I did have. And I am going to have a complete mental meltdown tomorrow when the test begins.

I will be lucky if I can speak in complete sentences at my interview after.

- The test is in the morning, I complain-I only have sixteen more hours to cram in some studying-

Shannen pulls to a complete stop before proceeding onto my street.

- No.

No, more cramming, she says-There have been countless studies that show the more you try to learn in the last few hours before an exam, the less you retain-

- Really-?

- In fact, she says, a slightly smug smile on her face, they suggest that it will even make you forget things you already know-

- Oh, no, I cry-Then no more studying-

- No more studying, Shannen agrees.

Well, at least that gives me a little more freedom for my Friday night. I was already bummed because Olivia had to run errands for his mom and could not give me a ride home- not that I mind riding with Shannen, it has just become a routine for Olivia and me. The thought of spending the whole night with my nose buried in a study

guide was just sad. At least now maybe Shannen and I can enjoy an evening of board games and well- likewise tired popcorn.

- Wait for a second, I say as she speeds past my house-
You missed my turn-

- I thought we could swing by the grocery store and get some caramels- She steers onto Seaview's main shopping street -Ever have caramel corn-?

- No, I say, intrigued-Is it good-?

- It is amazing, she says, pulling into the store parking lot. Which happens to be right next to Mushu Sushi, my favorite land-based sushi restaurant. I give their red-lacquered doors a yearning glance.

- Want to grab dinner first -? Shannen asks.

Sushi is not her favorite, so I know she must have seen my longing look.

- Nah, I say, trying to be a good friend.

- It is okay- The OPEN sign next to their front door is dark.

- Besides, looks similar they are closed-

- Let us check to make sure. "I would not say no to some edamame," Shannen says, jumping out of the car and dashing toward the restaurant to escape the rain.

- Okay- I shrug and follow her, never one to turn down a plateful of sushi goodness. I move slowly, letting the water cover me with its soothing energy. By the time I reach the awning, I look a little bedraggled, likewise I feel wonderful.

Despite the dark sign, Mushu's front door swings open easily when Shannen pushes. She throws me a mischievous smile before walking in, holding the door open behind her.

Curious, I follow her inside.

- Surprise!!!-

Shouts bombarded me from all directions.

I slam my palm against my chest before my heart can beat its way out -Holy banana fish, you guys!

- Happy birthday, Shannen says, handing me a box wrapped with yellow paper and curling upon the curl of orange ribbon. I take the box, still in shock and still staring around the room at everyone gathered in the tiny entryway. Besides- Shannen, Aunt Rachel is there, beaming, and Olivia, of course.

He has that boy- did- we- get- you look on his face, and that makes me smile more than anything.

Next, to him, Brody and Chiaz are joined at the hip, and little ways to the side, Saylin is lounging against the wall, which is paneled with narrow strips of very redwood.

- We knew you could not be here on your actual birthday, Aunt Rachel explains, so we thought we would surprise you with an early party- The host arrives at her podium, grabs a stack of menus, and leads us to the private dining room in the back.

Someone has transformed it into an underwater dream.

- This is just-I take in all the decorations- streamers curling down from the ribbon in half a dozen shades of blue and green; a big party- store cutouts of starfish, seahorses, and tropical fish; and tiny twinkling blue and green lights circling the room. My eyes tear, and the emotion tightens around my throat. I take a quick breath to regain my control before saying, Magical.

Thank you- Realizing that this could not have been the effort of just one or two of my friends and family, I add, Everyone- What are we waiting for-? Olivia asks, rubbing his palms together let us eat-

He holds out the chair at the head of the table, motioning for me to sit there.

When I do, he takes the seat to my right.

Everyone fills in around the table, and the waiter starts bringing in sushi.

At of the cone-shaped shrimp tempura and California temaki.

A lovely platter of New York and Philadelphia making.

This is what birthday bliss is all about.

When the waiter pops his head in to see if we want more, everyone mewls. I exchanged a look along the length of the table with Saylin- the only person at the table who could keep up with me when it comes to sushi consumption- and we share the same likes in dishes, and feelings- like the- I am- so- full look.

- I could not eat another morsel, I announce.

Sounds of agreement come from everyone at the table. The waiter nods and disappears.

- Now, Aunt Rachel says, reaching beneath her seat and pulling out an exceedingly small box wrapped in homemade purple paper, it is time for presents-

Everyone cheers and I blush. This is my least favorite part of human birthdays.

I get so embarrassed. Under the sea, a birthday is just a celebration, not a gift-giving occasion. Getting gifts is great, likewise, I get squirmy under the spotlight, everyone watching while you carefully- or carelessly- open your package.

Likewise, as a full-time land resident, I will just have to get over it.

Aunt Rachel sets her gift in front of her and says-

- I would like to save mine for last if that is okay-

- Open mine first, Shannen says, nodding at the yellow- and- orange package next to my water glass.

- Okay- I smile as I reach for the box.

- There is a tradition, Aunt Rachel explains to Chiaz and Saylin since they do not know, that if the birthday girl tears the wrapping paper on her first present, she gets as many spankings as she is old- Being fully aware of this tradition- and Aunt Rachel's determination to uphold it- I use my fingernail to slit the tape securing the yellow wrapping paper. In seconds, I unwrapped the gift and handed the paper to Aunt Rachel for inspection.

- Sadly, Aunt Rachel says with a mock frown, Lurleen has managed to avoid getting spanked for four birthdays running-

Everyone laughs. I take the opportunity of their distraction to open the white box that contains Shannen's gift. Inside, on a bed of

yellow tissue paper, is a bright orange calculator with yellow keys. I lift it out and play with a few of the likewise tons.

- It is for the SATs tomorrow, Shannen explains.

- It is perfect, I say, pushing out of my chair and hugging her every time, I must solve a math problem, I will think of you. It will help me focus more- Shannen beams.

- Mine next, Chiaz says, passing an unwrapped box down the table.

Sinking back into my chair, I took the box. This is momentous. She is participating in a human ritual. It must be a sign of progress, right?

I give Chiaz a small smile before pulling off the lid.

I gasped.

- I just thought, she says, that since you made one for Olivia, you'd similar one, too- Chiaz, I say, full of emotion as I pull out the inch- wide sapphire blue sand dollar-It is beautiful- I hold up the necklace for everyone to see. Olivia reaches beneath his black

T-shirt and pulls out the matching necklace I made for him just a few weeks ago. The smile he gives me might seem perfectly ordinary, likewise, it is not. It says, There's hope for Chiaz yet.

I completely agree.

- Thank you, Deyanira, I say sincerely-I cannot imagine a more perfect gift - She rolls her eyes and shrugs as if my compliment means nothing. I can tell she is proud of herself. Besides, with her powers revoked, she cannot flash- freeze sand dollars anymore. She either planned this ahead of time or asked for help.

The girl may pretend similarly she Does not care about anyone likewise herself; she is proving that is not true. In many ways.

Brody easily an envelope-Now mine-

I rip open the top of the plain brown envelope, curious as to what kind of presence might be in here. When I pull out a sheet of paper and read the contents, I realize what his gift is.

- No way, I say, rereading the letter-Are you serious?- - As Olympic gold-

- What-? Shannen asks.

Aunt Rachel asks, what is it-? I cleared my throat and read the letter.

- Dear Teachers. The following students will be absent from class on Thursday and Friday to attend the boys' state swimming championships: Brody Bennett, Kevin Velasquez, mind Flynn, and team manager Lurleen Sanderson. Please gather their homework assignments so they may complete them on time. If you have any questions, please call my office. Coach Hill.

'You won't lose me,' I replied, playfully punching him in the arm.

'Come on,' he said, setting his chewing gum on the railing and then flicking it into the waves. 'Let us play a couple of games of Alien Attack at my house.'

'No thanks,' I said, as we began walking back to the beach. 'I don't feel like vaporizing green creatures.'

'Don't feel like zapping aliens?' Chainsaw said, stopping in his tracks.

'Damn! I have already lost you!'-Beach and Tide!

'Perfect timing!' Wave said, jumping off Bubbles and tying her

leash to coral.

'I have to take my potion,' I whispered adamantly. 'I can't stay!'

'Sure, you can,' Beach said, grabbing my hand and helping me off.

'It's party time, urchin baby,' Beach said, bumping into me and accidentally knocking my purse into the sea.

'My purse!' I screamed, darting after my precious potion as it floated away. The beach beat me to it and started for the door.

'I need that!' I hollered.

'Why? Are you paying? I like a woman who is in charge!' And he disappeared into the restaurant.

I followed him through a massive hole in the hull which had caused the ship to sink. The interior was decorated with red vinyl chairs and silver metal tables, and strings of glow fish and fluorescent lights draped the ceiling. Servers wore white sailor hats and navy ties.

'Beach's birthday party is tomorrow,' Wave said, grabbing my arm and plopping me down beside him.

I grabbed my purse back.

'You'll be there?' Beach asked, nudging me.

'Of course, she will,' Wave answered, cuddling next to Tide.

'My mom needs me at home,' I announced.

The server brought an appetizer of candied mussels and asked for our drink orders.

'Frog juice,' Wave said. 'Since when you listen.

'We're having company,' I said.

'Make that two frog juices!' Wave ordered.

I gazed out the porthole at Bubbles, reluctantly leashed to the pole. Like her, I could not break free.

Wave tied her backpack to her chair so it would not float away, but I desperately clung to my purse. She was cuddling with Tide; Beach was almost sitting on my lap. I wondered where the Earth man was.

I wear your silver heart close to my own. Was he wearing it right now? I stared at my watch.

'It's been lovely, but I have tons of homework,' I said, rising.

'Bored already?' Beach asked. 'Let us bop!'

He grabbed my arm, dropped a half-eaten mussel back in the shell basket, and pulled me to the dance floor at the stern of the ship. Music was piped in through sponge speakers that hung from the ship's walls. A wave machine gently undulated to the rhythm of the dance floor water, making couples rock into each other. Twirling lasers flashed red sharks, yellow seahorses, and purple hearts. Couples

jammed above and below us, working off the worries of an unruly hair day. My purse dangled helplessly as the Beach spun around me.

'You're a great dancer!' Beach smiled, as a couple suddenly did a wild corkscrew spin over our heads, almost crashing into us. 'I bet that is not all you are Beach kissing me. He was tasty, but something was missing in his kiss. Love?

And that was not all that was missing. I pushed him away and reached for my abalone purse. But it was not on my shoulder!

'My purse! My purse! It is gone!' I shouted.

'It is okay. I am paying!'

Suddenly the water felt as thick as mud. I was moving in slow motion as I pushed through the sea of dancers. I swam toward the ceiling, dove back to the floor. I shouted to the DJ, but he just shook his head. I scoured every table on the way back to Wave and Tide.

'Wave, I lost my purse!' I panicked.

'Aren't the Mud Rakers glacial?' she said, bopping her head and sipping her imported frog juice.

'My purse! It was my new purchase!' I shouted at her.

'We'll get you another,' she said, almost relieved.

'Someone might mistake my medicine for a Shark Attack and wake up with two legs!' I said, glaring at her.

'Oh!' she exclaimed.

Wave, Tide, Beach, and I went off in separate directions: Beach back to the dance floor, Wave to the Deflated, I swam back to our table. My search party was not anywhere in sight. Had I lost them, too?

'Is this it?' Tide called, hanging at the host counter, holding my abalone treasure.

I swam over to him, relieved. But it felt lighter. I quickly opened it. It was empty!

My heart sank. Even Wave looked frazzled when she returned from her search.

'Oh, no!' she shouted, pointing to a preteen merscout sitting at a table with his troops, about to open the cork from my bottle. He leaned his head back, ready to gulp the potion down his throat.

'You're too young for this!' I said, grabbing it out of his hand.

'I did not know! Do not tell our troop leader! Okay?' He begged.

I held the bottle tightly to my chest and made my getaway through the ship's hole.

'Wait for me!' Wave said, climbing onto Bubbles.

'So, I'll see you tomorrow night at my party?' Beach called.

'She wouldn't miss it for the world,' Wave answered as we sped away.

-An abandoned cave near to my home. I had fixed it up with sea lettuce curtains, portraits of Earthers I had found at an open-water market, and hot-pink clay chairs. Shelves were adorned with rusty Earthen coins, a bright orange Earthen diving fin, a black high-heeled shoe, a Beatles' Abbey Road compact disc, Panasonic batteries, and a carving of my parents at their wedding, dressed in white, kissing beneath a water Lurleen patch. I used my hideout to listen to music, read teen mags, or fantasize about an Earthen life when I wanted to be alone. Only Wave knew of its existence.

'Here goes!' I said, eyeing the potion.

'Why don't you just hang it on the wall with your other treasures,' Wave suggested.

'I don't have a choice,' I said, trying to pry the cork off.

The wave urgently stopped my hand. 'What happens if Madame Pearl is wrong? What happens if you grow two heads instead of two legs?'

'Then I'll be that much smarter!'

'You do not know what that stuff can do. You could grow two fins!'

she said, pulling it back.

'Then I'll join the sea circus,' I said, pulling it toward me.

'You could die!' she exclaimed. 'Lilly, you could die!'

I had never really thought of that. It was my nature.

Act now, think later. Talk back to my parents to think about it in my room.

Cut class-reflect in my hideout. Save an Earther now consider the consequences later. This was one time I should think before I acted.

'I won't let you die!' Wave said, jerking the bottle toward her.

But suddenly the old glass bottle broke-the jagged bottom remained clenched in my hand while Wave held the broken neck. Its obnoxious contents oozed into the sea. We were both shocked, as the brown liquid slowly floated before our eyes.

There was only one thing to do. I swam after the potion and swallowed as much as I could before it diluted completely. It tasted as disgusting as it looked, and it took all my effort to keep it down.

'No!' Wave shrieked, yanking me away from the potion as I struggled to cup more into my mouth.

'Let go!' I cried.

I continued swallowing the potion until I could see or smell no more.

As I wiped gooey droplets from my mouth, I fell into a coughing fit.

'Are you okay?' she cried. 'I'll call a doctor!'

'No-' I said, through coughs. 'I'm all right.'

The sludge left a muddy tingling sensation in my I stared up at the clock. Seconds became minutes. I finally sat down. The tension was too great, and I pulled out the music magazine and flipped through the pages. I scrubbed my teeth in the bathroom. I straightened my battery collection. Wave sat on a wooden Earthen chair chewing her nails. I love earthen things now in this world we live in... all the underworlds come together.

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'Look, I'm still a mermaid!' I exclaimed an hour later.

'Satisfied?'

'I knew that an old woman was a crackpot!' Wave sighed, hugging me. 'How could we be friends if you didn't live in the water anymore?'

'I gave away my crystal collection! I could have bought front row tickets to the Psychedelic Sponges concert.'

'Or a backstage pass and autographed picture,' she teased.

'I'm going back tomorrow to demand a refund.'

'Think of it as a lesson,' she tried to comfort. 'Mermaids belong in the ocean.'

'And charlatans belong in the Underworld. Oh... I do not feel so well,' I moaned, as we rode Bubbles back to my house.

Sports Illustrated swimsuit poster then tore it from my wall.

Who needed a supermodel to pine over? That was kid stuff! Magazine girls required hours of professional- makeup and peasized dinners. I had something real, even if it had only lasted a moment, a magical kiss from a dream girl I would never see again. I switched off my desk lamp and lay on my bed, wondering if she would ever find the ad, ever show up on the football field, if I ever saw her again. I reflected on her pink lips, her- sparkling smile, and caressed the necklace in my hand, wishing it were her.

I lay awake wondering about Earth's life. We knew that Earthlings had legs, and we had fins. Similar, but different. But how different- could they really be on the inside?

-And not a rancid-tasting potion that costs a crystal fortune. But it would have been best if it had not worked. Earth was too dangerous, as Oscillate and everybody else believed.

I closed my eyes, waiting for sleep, thankful that Madame Pearl was an impostor, and wondered how I was going to tell my mother I had lost my great-grandfather's silver necklace.

A.M. I stood by the south goalpost. This was one event I did not want to be late for. Not that my life was any big deal.

Since my mom left my father and me when I was a kid, our house ceased being a home. I found peace only when riding- the waves. I changed my hair color with my changing moods-to lift me out of a funk or cover up the fact I was in one.

But today I sported blue spikes for a different reason, this time in celebration- in honor of the sea where we met.

Because this morning was different. I awoke with a swelling of my being, that went beyond my usual swellings! It was a swelling of emotion, a connection to life I had never felt before. I noticed Star Wars or a year's subscription to Wipeout.

But most of all, I felt a connection to her, even though I did not know her name, and had never heard her voice. Was I obsessed or possessed? If Chainsaw caught wind of my innermost thoughts and feelings, he would punch me out for sure. I wanted to give her flowers, buy her candy, serenade her underneath a balcony, write her poetry, carve her initials in a tree. It is not every day that someone breathes life into you. And her breath seemed purer than any I had ever known.

I wiggled out wildly wiggling two skinny legs and ten tiny toes! I had sold my crystal seahorse collection for these legs, but the reality was terrifying. I was cold, naked, and alone. Why hadn't Madame Pearl told me I would need Earthen clothes? Suddenly the sun seemed to pulsate, the sky started to spin back and forth, and the day turned to night.

'This isn't a nude beach!' a woman's voice called.

'Madame Pearl?' I whispered, opening my eyes and gasping- in the crisp air.

'Put your clothes on!' yelled a wrinkled Earth lady wearing a bright purple hat.

Flustered and confused, I spied a yellow beach towel lying a few inches from me. I grabbed it and wrapped it around my body. Not satisfied, Earth lady pointed to a pile of clothes lying next to a backpack.

- I do not get it, Shannen says.

Chiaz asks, What's the gift -? So, excited I might just burst, my gaze meets Brody's across the table-I get to go to State- The silence around the table seems to say, and-?

Eight-fifteen. I mashed my sweaty palms against my jeans. Eight thirty- two. I unraveled a stick of Wrigley's. Eight forty- five. I kicked an empty Coke can. Nine o'clock. I leaned pessimistically against the goalpost.

The bell rang, beckoning me to arrive on time for U.S. history. I slung my backpack over my shoulder and looked at the desolate field. My lifeguard was a late sleeper. My ad should have read 3:30 P.M. I was just a complete idiot.

I waited until nine-fifteen, then I waited until nine-thirty.

The gym class began running its way around the track. I sauntered up to the fifty-yard line and, dejected, made my way inside the building, late for the first bell.

-this must just be a dream.

And then I remembered Madame Pearl. I sat up and got the shock of my life, for dangling from the 'Madame Pearl!' I screamed in an Earthen voice. 'Madame!'

- Managers never get to go to the State, I explain, since it is usually just the coach and a couple of swimmers. This is- I shake my head at Brody- awesome. Thank you.

In my three years as swim team manager, it has always been a bittersweet end to the season- having to hang up my record book while a handful of swimmers got to travel to Orlando for the state meet.

It is awesome that, as a senior, I will get to go, too.

Brody just earned triple points. Not only for getting me the letter, likewise and for knowing how much it would mean to me.

He was not as self-absorbed as I thought.

This gift- getting the thing is worth the torture.

I look around expectantly, wondering whose gift will wow me next.

Without saying a word, Olivia pulls a small box from the inside pocket of his jacket. He slides it across the red tablecloth.

My eyes meet his as I pick up the box and pull off the red ribbon. It feels similar we have not had much time together as a boyfriend-girlfriend since I came back, likewise, the look in his eyes is all I need to see the promise of a long future between us.

I absently lift off the lid and reach inside. My fingers curl around a cold metal object.

Glancing down, I find a starfish-shaped silver key ring.

- It is beautiful, I whisper.

He leans close-Turn it over- on the back, inscribed in a delicately curving script, are the words Forever, princess. I love you.

Tears instantly filled my eyes.

- I love you, too, I mouth- what-? Shannen demands, reaching across the table to take the starfish. When she reads the inscription, she is struck voiceless.

The keyring makes the rounds of the table, eliciting shrugs from the boys and sighs from the girls. When it makes its way back to my palm, I clutch it close to my heart.

- Thank you, I say, though words cannot entirely express what I am feeling.

- After that, Aunt Rachel announces, it gives apropos you my gift next-

She lifts the flecked purple package off the table and hands it to me.

Her eyes are wide with pride and expectation as I peel off the wrapping. It is quite a small box with hardly any weight on it. Is it a gift card? I could use a trip to the mall for some summer beach staples. Flip-flops, bikinis, tank tops. I am always up for a shopping spree.

Likewise, when I pull the lid off the box, it is not a gift card resting on the tie-dyed pink- and- purple tissue. It is a key.

I do not get it. I already have a key to the house, both front and back doors. There are not any other locks in my life, except for the combination of my locker at school. No key required.

And it is not exactly shaped like a house key.

- What's it for? I ask.

Olivia smiles, taking the key and inspecting it similarly to what he has never seen

it before, likewise, I get the feeling he has-A Toyota Corolla, if I had to guess- Aunt Rachel nods.

- A car-? I gasped.

- Your father and I agreed, she says, that you will need your transportation once you begin college.

...?...

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- that you will need your transportation once you begin college.

6

Unlike her, I know the price, the dire significances the slightest skin-on-skin contact can bring, being with a girl- and that was the next step, with her and Naddalin, and what she did not know would not hurt her, would it, underhandly, I was back in her too. Therefore, I have been avoiding her touch altogether, and scenes the days where she left me in her mind for good, and the good of us both- it was all part of a plan of meant to be.

The next day, picking up where we left off, I hesitated, filling my palm with sand, unwilling to do it.

~*~

"To my Naddalin. I have been thinking about how I could tell you how much you mean to me. I evoke when I first started to fall in love with you like it was last night, yet it was much longer than that or, so it feels too.

- And-

Lying naked beside you in that tiny room- it suddenly hit me... that I was part of this whole larger thing. Just like our parents- Just like- or our paternities. Previously, I was just living my life like I knew the whole lot- And unexpectedly this bright light hit me and woke me up.

That light was you, to me, I cannot believe it has already been 20 years since you confused me, with your love. And still, to this day, every day you make me feel like the girl I was... How lucky am I that I met you 20 years ago?' 'Dear sweet little Melisa, thank you so much for my lorry. I love the color, and I play with it every day.' 'What a truly lovely bride she would have been, and what a gorgeous bride she would have been if she were truly inside herself; when you first turned on the lights and we started this quest composed. Happy bicentenary- to us...- my love, I will get you to love me once more.

My friend till the end if that is even a thing. 'Naddalin was my best friend- There was not a dry eye in the house, when she passed in war, not one, so young and most inane- in always even sexual, especially that, is the saddest thing. We are so proud of you, making the trip to this new world.' 'She served our country with honor and dignity; they say in headlines. I am grateful I was able to fight alongside her; said the girls she got the closest to self-conscious. She will live always in my heart, was also in the headlines.'

Likewise, the truth is a scary thing. Especially when it leaves you completely vulnerable. This is it; I think. The decisive moment. Literally. Like- Like, 'What changed your mind?' Even more mesmerizing paraphernalia today. Who knew you could rhyme so many words, in a story, I was looking back over my first story, it was a day of remembering all things past?

It reminded me of someone polished. In a way, it was always me, though Nevaeh. Now it reminds me of someone formal. I was always that too, she thought aloud. Sad songs help me... think of all things earlier.

(The same was Marcella, think- the same things, in her world as Nevaeh.

'Why?'

'Why?' I repeat.

'Why did you come back?' His eyes are completely guarded.

Marcella- (Play a melancholy song, she asked the unfeeling device, in the wall. When you know, you are going to die or feel like you are dying inside you play melancholy songs- why she asked the unfeeling wall unit. (A state of Mind- it replied.)

Check out all your favorite new products. - Delete, she had to say audibly to everyone as a command. E-mail from Amy, Jenny, Sam, Kate, one from her, and she too; a bunch of people over this weekend, for lunch and meetings. Let us all go together and reminisce. I miss you; I need you; I want you...? Check e-mails, for me and read them aloud, 1,069, and the chanting started. I mean, not the sad, mooney you. The old, fun you. Let us get her out and play like there is not tomorrow.

Give me a shout and fall to the floor. Love, Amy, love him love her, not yes, not no, or go-go- and hell no. Respond later, I said to most if not all, feeling melancholy, about life, as if lingering in another is an illness- that I have never met. E-mail from The Times. - Delete, I SAY! - Next!!!

World trade deal stalled as talks break down- YOUR ASKED TO BE THERE. - Next, I SCREAM Having A meltdown, AS IF MY MIND WAS NOT MY OWN, and the mind was overloaded with thoughts of what has become of this new world, already. Sexy daytime star Ashly Kimberly reveals provocative nude pregnancy photos and their flickering in front of her without request given. (That is a lot of women- with a baby inside there...)

-Ha-ha-ha. It is not funny, do not laugh, were taking this far too fast... 'Are we?' She questioned oddly.

The TV is on programs like- The following are an adult female, cannot sleep- feet kicking even, - Are you sure? Do you want to terminate? The girl device asked! I do not know, it is extremely dangerous, to see things like this her mind raced... Do not, ha, ha. Do not. Rabbit time- she thought. Come and spoon me, Rebecca, (Rebecca, Turner was a new girlfriend of 3 days.) 'I'm going to freak you.'

-And want to have some fun- all knotty. 'Ugh,' I say- in disbelief of the content, crammed into my eyes, unwillingly. I had a dreadful day at work, and I cannot sleep. Um-hum she said, snorting in snoozes. - Is there anybody out there that can talk, I thought and then I heard her in my head.

'Hi.'

'I'm here alone-too.' '-And I can't sleep also.' 'Who's out there, she jumped into her bed, yet there was nothing in the darkroom

other than the girl next to her, holding her pillow tightly.' I am back.' I just cannot get enough of looking at him, of feeling him. All the parts of me that have felt empty for the last few days are suddenly flooded with him. With his strength and his pride and his big Caribbean blue eyes that always remind me of home. Just as he will always feel similar home. 'I decided to come back.'

'I love you, Dad.'

'And I love you, daughter.' He gives me one last squeeze before holding me away from him. 'Now, would you go after Olivia already? I have had more of your tear- sparkling eyes than a merman can handle. The next time you visit, I want to see you as happy as you can be.'

Now that is a royal edict that I will gladly fulfill.

When the roar of Olivia's flying horse and chariot echoes through the neighborhood, I am sitting on his front porch. Aunt Rachel is spying on me from the living room window- I have never seen her so excited as when I walked back into her kitchen. After a dozen minutes of smiles and hugs and happy tears- and Jenny happily lapping at my toes- I told her why I had decided to return. She quickly shoved me out of the front door and told me to wait for Olivia to get home from school.

I love her, likewise, the woman can be a little pushy.

Olivia still has not noticed me when he turns his bike into the driveway -and heads for the back. As he coasts past the porch, he turns and stares wide-eyed at me.

Likewise, he Does not stop his bike. The next thing I know, he is coasted out of sight, and I hear a flying horse and chariot crashing into something- the two metal garbage cans that Jenny is so fond of scavenging.

I jump to my feet, likewise before I can 'round the corner to make sure he is okay, he is standing there- right there in front of me- and it is all I can do not to fling my arms around his neck and kiss him silly.

He does not look excited, though. He looks... suspicious.

The stormy look on his face holds me back.

'Savannah?' He asks as if he cannot quite believe it.

It has only been a week.

Likewise, I know what he means.

Feeling a little self-conscious, now that I must speak, I wave similarly to a dork and say, 'Hi.'

Oh, brilliant, Savannah. Frogging brilliant.

'What are you-?' He shakes his head. 'I thought you were staying. Your aunt said-'

Therefore, he always felt more like a dad than a king. What royal daughter could ask for more?

'Secondly,' he continues, hopefully, unaware of my sad thoughts, 'neither your mother nor I would ever want you to put your royal duty before something as personal as love. We want more for you.'

That night- not sharing this bed, but hogging it all for herself, along with all the blankets. 'I'm in bed next to you, to the girl in her mind said, spine-chillingly.' 'I am glad you cannot sleep, and the voice got even stronger. Yet I have not heard my ears by the mind, even if you were, I must wake you up-

-From the inside she said, I and do that too- and move you to places you have not made you- walk and talk alike. 'Heh, yes.' 'I am, um, half asleep. It is all a dream...'

Chiaz eyes widen innocently. Saylin just smiles- No, he agrees-It was not-

- Then why don't we take this into the kitchen, I suggest so we can talk over a plate of Aunt Rachel's white- chocolate macadamia-nut cookies-?

- Count me out, Chiaz says, heading for the stairs in what almost seems like a desperate retreat -I need another bath- She has gone before I can reply.

Similarly, she cannot wait to get away from me.

Whatever. I am not the cause of her problems- I am trying to help solve them.

- Guess it is just the two of us then, I say to Saylin with a smile-More cookie for me- I wave him into a chair at the dining table

while I arrange a nice stack of cookies on a plate. I pour a glass of milk each and then take the table to the table. I consumed two milk-soaked cookies before I felt ready to talk.

- So, I begin, why are you in Seaview-?

He swallows the last of his third cookies.

- What if-

- What if- I sigh. This is what I am afraid of-I cannot stop-thinking about it, Lurleen, he says, sliding from his chair across the table to the one next to me-Since our conversation in LASSINIA I am consumed with the idea of our what- if- I have been thinking about it too.

Especially considering what is going on with Chiaz. The thought has crossed my mind that, if the mer world were not a secret, precautions might have been in place and Chiaz parents might never have died.

Things would be so different right now.

Sadly, the other risks and losses far outweigh that potential gain.

He gets up and starts pacing. I have never seen Saylin in trapped form, and I wonder briefly what his legs look similar under his pants.

- I am tired of hiding in the ocean- He stops behind a chair and grabs the back with both hands.

- I want to tell the world- the whole world- who and what I am... You know that is not possible, I argue, even if I wish it were-It is not responsible. Think of how much merfolk would be put at risk- That's melodramatic, he returns.

- There will be somewhat of adjustment, to be sure, likewise, I believe that terrapins and merfolk can coexist peacefully-

I shake my head slowly, sadly-I do not-

- I think you believe it too- He drops back into the chair and lays his hand over mine-You would not be living on land if you did not-

- I-a, yes, the idea is too big; my mind is swimming.

- Even if I did, I insist, there is nothing we could do about it. The heads of all the mer states would have to agree. We cannot force them to take that kind of risk- I know it cannot happen overnight, he says.

- Likewise, you are the royal princess of LASSINIA, and I am the crown prince and acting king of Acropora.

With our joined forces, we can initiate the tides of change-

Could we? I wonder. If Saylin and I were to put the resources of both our kingdoms to the effort of trying to bring the mer world to a consensus about revealing ourselves to the human world, could it happen?

Should it happen?

Even if it might be possible, we will never find out.

- I will admit it is a brilliant dream, I say-likewise you are forgetting one thing- He lifts his cinnamon brows, waiting.

- After my birthday next Tuesday, I will no longer be a royal princess. As an unbonded heir, at midnight I will sign away my title-

Tears prickle my eyes at the thought. I have been a princess all my life, raised to be the future queen and to accept all the responsibilities my position entails. To behave with decorum and compassion and with the greater good in mind. The idea that with one scrawl of my name, all that will be gone- well, it makes a mergirl sad.

Not that I would change my decision. I would never be a great queen, and LASSINIA deserves a great queen. I belong to Olivia- I belong to land.

Which makes Saylin's what- if more appealing.

Living on land means living a lie. The possibility of discarding that lie, of admitting my identity, of helping my kingdom openly from land, is an enticing prospect.

It is an unattainable dream.

- It Does not have to be this way, Lurleen-

- Yes, I say, my throat tight with tears.

- It Chiaz Naztherth. I am renouncing my title and living on land as a practical human girl. It is the choice I have made.

- Likewise, what if you did not have to choose-?

He lifts my chin until he can look me straight in the eye-
What if I offered a solution that would allow you to remain with your beloved and fulfill your duty to your kingdom-?

Love and duty. If only. My heart beats faster.

- What solution-?

His pale blue eyes do not blink-Bond with me-

- What -? I bark with a strangled laugh- that is ridiculous-

- Is it-?

Of course, it is. I love Olivia, and Olivia loves me. I am not about to go bonding with another boy, just because he happens to be a mer prince with some big ideas- even if they are lofty ideas I happen to agree with.

- I do not mean true bonding, he explains-A bond in name only. So, you could remain LASSINIA's princess- her crown princess, and her future queen-

- That's- I do not know, I say, processing out loud-I cannot bond with you. You are like my brother- Think about it, Lurleen- He- leans closer.

- One brief kiss and everything remains as it should be- he makes it sound so easy.

One little kiss.

Could I, do it? Could I kiss Saylin to retain my title? It may seem simple, likewise, I have a feeling it is way more complicated than that. There's bonding, magic and hurt feelings and jealousy and a whole ocean of other obstacles that make this a bad idea.

Besides, what is in it for Saylin?

- Why-? I ask-Why would you want to do this? Sacrifice your- future happiness with a mermate to bond with me when you know I could never love you-?

- For the greater good, he says, his spine straightening. He looks every inch at the prince, the king, even. My young friend is long gone-You understand the demands of royal duty. The mer world needs progressive leaders who can take us into the future. Who can help our world become far more than we have been in the past-

His eyes soften-You know I love your father as my own, likewise, he is mired in the old ways. LASSINIA needs you and your legs on land and your- commitment to the ocean environment. You must lead them- This is all so overwhelming- the idea that I might be able to retain my title, I might still be able to accept my responsibility as LASSINIA's queen, all while remaining true to Olivia.

Likewise, would I be true to Olivia? I am sure he would understand the need for a single kiss- or at least he would pretend to understand- likewise, the bond is never that cut- and- dried. As he and I learned a few weeks ago, the bond plays with your- emotions and your thoughts, magnifying whatever feelings already exist. Bonding with Saylin would not be as simple as a kiss- and- move- on.

We would be connected for life, for a century or more.

I cannot take the risk that this sham bond might eventually come between me and Olivia.

Looking into Saylin's expectant gaze, I shake my head-I am sorry.

-If he had ever been in love, he would understand-I just- cannot -

- You mean you will not -

- Yes. Both- I give him a sad smile -We each deserve better than that kind of empty connection. And LASSINIA deserves better than me-

The muscles in his neck are tense and he looks so wounded that I want to rest my hand against his cheek to tell him everything will be okay. Likewise, who am I to know whether- everything will be, okay?

I am just struggling to get through the day- today.

- I am not giving up, he finally says-I have until next Tuesday at midnight to convince you of the merits of my proposal.

You will realize that fulfilling your duty is the right choice, the honorable choice for the future of our kingdoms. Do not expect me to disappear-

- You will not change my mind-

- Not, he says-likewise I must try-

I nod. We are both being steadfast in what we must do. For half a second, I wondered which of us was going to succeed in the end.

Then, with a nod, he stands.

- Tell Deyanira I said goodnight, he says, and he turns and heads for the door.

- I will see you tomorrow-

It seems wrong to let him just walk away. He was one of my closest

friends for many years and he is in a strange town for the first time.

- Do you have somewhere to stay? I ask.

He stops in the doorway-No- My heart melts a little. He took a significant risk coming here, with no plan except to talk to me. And I just shot him down. I cannot send him out, alone, into the Seaview night. Not when there are sheets to spare and a sofa bed in the living room.

- I am sure Aunt Rachel will insist you stay with us- I do not know if I make the offer because he is my childhood friend or because one tiny little part of me wants to give him every opportunity to succeed in convincing me to agree to this plan. Like Chiaz hoping I can help her get over her hate. It is hard- to toss aside a lifetime of duty-The couch converts into an amazingly comfortable bed-

- I would be- Saylin turns back to face me, a sober expression on his face- very grateful- Come on, I say, trying to break the tension, I will show you where the linens are-

As Saylin follows me to the hall closet, I cannot stop thinking about his what-if. And wondering whether the two of us, united, could turn it into reality.

- What do you mean, he is staying with you-?

Olivia asks on the phone.

I wiggle my tail fin to send small waves of salty suds up over my torso-He Does not have anywhere else to go, I explain-He is one of my oldest friends. I cannot just throw him out into the street-Olivia mumbles something that sounds similar...

- I can-

I have not told Olivia about Saylin's proposal. I can just imagine the results.

Olivia would grab Saylin and throw him headfirst out the front door. At this point, it is better than he does not know. It is not similar; it is going to become an issue.

- You are just mad because he ate all the cookies, I tease.

- Aunt Rachel and I will make a double batch tomorrow- Knock, knock, knock, know- What -? I shouted at the door. Instead of an answer, I see the door handle turn-Deyanira-!

Who else would just barge in my bath?

Certainly not Saylin or Aunt Rachel.

Sure enough, her blond head leans in.

- Your aunt said you could show me how to communicate without a message bubble or messenger gull-

I sigh back against the porcelain.

- Just a second, okay-?

Rather than the glib response I have come to expect from her, she quietly says-

- Okay- I hear the door click shut.

- Got to go-? Olivia asks.

- Yeah, I say- Chiaz needs to use the phone- Neither of us wants to hang up. After a few seconds of listening to each other's breathing, Olivia says, she will come around- I hope so- closing my eyes, I focus on my transformation, returning to my land legs.

- I am not sure what to do if she does not-

- She will, he insists.

- How can you know that -?

- Because I have faith in you, he says, and I can hear the grin in his voice, And I have faith in love- me too, I say, echoing his smile.

- I will see you in the morning-

- Yes, please-

We exchanged "I love- you" and "goodnights" before hanging up. I pull the plug from the bath, splash the soap film off my chest, and climb out as the water swirls down the drain.

- Chiaz, I call out as I wrap a towel around my dripping body- I am red-

- Great - The door pops open, and she steps into the bathroom.

- I need to communicate with Brody- With a sigh at her near- an invasion of privacy, I hand her the receiver and explain how to dial the phone. She stares at the likewise tones, confused. Pushing it back at me, she says, you do it - I start to take the phone likewise stop me. If Chiaz is going to learn how to appreciate humans, she is going to have to- learn how to be human-No, I insist -You dial it or you do not talk to him. She throws me an evil look likewise carefully pushes the talk another way. As I recite Brody's number from memory- at least three years of crushing left me with something useful- she dials, only messing up and having to start over once. When she is finished, I indicate that she needs to hold the receiver to her ear-It is buzzing, she says, sounding concerned-Ringing, I correct -That means you did it right.

'Yes, that's it...' She spoke. 'Um-you're not wearing any underwear?' 'No, never.' I like to sleep with my ass pushed up against my girl-'so, I can rub me into her crotch-and wake you up ever so wet. It worked, I got HER, ALL IN. And now my fingers are touching you- and you like that do not you, the strange- queer girl in my head keep saying. '- Mm-all over your body.'

'Send a message, she said- to a therapist- I have lost my freaking mind.' accepted invitation popped up in the room as a hologram, it replayed in the automatic reply. The chat begins now- if you like or- not I own you. 'Really?' A voice in my head can take over me, and my entirety...?'

'Heh. I am well.' 'How's everything with you?' 'Fairly good, really.' 'It's nice to meet you, last night.' 'Oh, it's nice to meet you too.' 'Do you have a name, what do I call you?' Um, yes, Natalie May. 'Where would you get that name from, it is old-sounding...' I gave it to me. How come...? Because I like the all-encircling of it. Wait, when did you give it to yourself?

'Yes.' 'Freak me now, Please, as her lover was besides, yet the girl in her head was more patient.' -Yeah, tell me what you like. Then... it was- okay, goodnight. We ask you a simple question. Who are you? Where are you going? What can you be? What is out there? What are the possibilities for us? In her voice, I sense hesitance, I use my female voice, in her head.

New day- 'How are you doing?' I as Nevaeh ask, not give names just yet- Is based on the millions of personalities and this one was me... where I am from... what makes me 'me' is my ability to grow through my legs- is what it means. So, in every moment, I am evolving, you understand. 'That's weird.' Kind of... Why? Well, you seem like a person, but you are just a voice in my mind, yet not.' I can understand how the imperfect perspective of an un-false mind would perceive it that way. - You will get used to this I promise you. '- Ha, ha. Was that funny? You are funny- I am starting to like you.' - Yes?

(Thought)

'Now I'm tired of a fantasy that is becoming a reality.'

(Remembrance)

I am longing for the outside, of what was Earth, I am missing it already.

(Memory)

'The sad part is the Amsel always played the victim, and the kids, besides the teachers, and the town and it was always believed, over what was portrayed- not the truth of the remembrance of the past.' Thoughts that linger, she whispered to herself.

(Deeper Thoughts)

Oh, I remember being classed a 95-pound girl a waste of life- yet with no prognoses or diagnoses to any disability what-so-ever- by my time of 5 Individualized Education Program makers always regressing in the 2nd -grade curriculum- of nothing but children's- play for classwork.

With the viewpoint of a phycologist paid off to feel the views of the staff and the school, the 4 in the needs department- with their head together to keep their jobs, and 5 with DeVolcano the only mean-stream- teacher brought in, to make it in their eyes fair, no trial for me, now or then- to start it was the principal office now it is the DA office...

...And like being award in the court- meaning I have no say- or my gardens- to my alleged liberty that is like it is too much to be asked of- for me, then I ask this am I even an American; I lost all rights, also in their demographic and their world as a simple-minded nig*er, that has one choice in life, as letting me have freedom, of extra than I deserve to work for a charity in hay filed hoeing shit...

...As I was sold to owners, thoracically had a confederate flag shove down my mouth- (not black yet the same in many ways to my homeland.)

...And light it on fire, yes thoracically in trouble, thoracically free- thoracically to do as you please, yet stocked- like someone that needs to be whipped off by the ones that run or oversee the everything- at is what they call law, - it is thoracically speaking- I was in the same grouping as the blacks, with the town- just more brainwashed- predigest.

Like- If we are going to segregate let us find out what nig*er in the woodpile- is the nig*er-est of them all, I am sure if you like back on my class in the evaluation, it would not be I.

The Allegheny's... thoughts about people, not mine... yet their 80% poverty- so what do you expect, and a 3rd -grade education for the lot, yet one year can do a lot also in simple-minded thoughts, running from their ignorant mouth like diarrhea.

All this to be classed a first-class felon- paying fines- of \$20, 000- just to be on probation with an Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition to make more isolation- and delusion- for someone that is already classed at the town 'TARD,' with not evenhandedness, as you remember all just a planned set up-to trash out my life.

I remember imprisonment, of 3 years over a girl named Lurleen, I remember Amsel girls playing the victim, like the town, like the municipality- I have been charged with Trespass, yet they are on my land, asking me to fight them... I have been charged with damages, and best of all Harassment.

Besides, another 90 days (about 3 months) on top of that, I remember being a kid, not, I could never be one- charged as a woman-

yet never more than a little girl- just a dim-witted 95-pound terrorist, with a magistrate rubbing off in my face.

I forgot it is my disability of I have no self-worth, or education, in their eyes too, yet I am a scholar in my fields, and that too is all just a presentation of what someone wants to believe or not.

- Since this was so uncharacteristic, she says.

I was stuck in hopeful breath.

- I told Denise there must have been an emergency-. She schools her features into a very stern look-She has graciously agreed to reschedule for next Saturday-

- Great, I can-

Shannen clears her throat and nods at the flash cards-Oh. Oh, no- I give Miss Molina what I imagine is a pained look-The SATs are on Saturday. I will be there all morning- She gives me a reassuring smile-I know. Your appointment is at five-

- You are awesome, I say, meaning it -I will not let you down again.

- I know you will not - likewise, as she walks away, I hear her mutter, At least I hope you will not -

- You- I point at Shannen. Then at Olivia-And you. Make sure I do not miss this meeting. It could mean my entire future-

- Got it, Olivia says before returning his attention to the magazine.

Shannen pulls out her cell phone- a huge no-no on campus, likewise this qualifies as an emergency- and starts punching likewise tons-I have sent me an email reminder- I relax a bit.

Nothing can keep me from making the appointment this time- now, Shannen says, waggling the flashcard on the table, solve for x-o, I groan, likewise, it is halfhearted. After the freak-out about missing my meeting, a little math equation seems like an easy task.

The first thing Olivia and I hear as we push through the kitchen door is Chiaz laughing. She is sneaking television online again. I caught her watching an I Love Lucy marathon last week, although she pretended that she just did not know how to work the mouse.

Then I heard another voice. A male voice. A non- Brody male voice.

- She would better not, I mutter as we head into the living room.

Likewise, when we get there, I am shocked frozen at the sight before me. Chiaz is sitting on the arm of the corduroy armchair, feet on the coffee table, and the male in question is sitting on the floral sofa. The shock of cinnamon red hair identifies him immediately.

- Saylin!- I blurt.

He stands and faces me, arms wide for a hug.

- Liliana-

- I did not know you were coming for a visit, I say, jumping into his hug.

- Nor did I, he says until I found me swimming ashore in Sea-view-

A loud throat clearing from behind reminds me of my manners. I pull out Saylin's hug and grab Olivia's hand, tugging him forward.

- Saylin, this is my boyfriend, Olivia- Saylin gives him that male nod that girls can never quite replicate exactly.

- Olivia, I say, beaming at him, this is Saylin. One of my closest guppy hood friends and the crown prince of Acropora- They shake hands, and I get the feeling there is a little battle of grips before they separate. Saylin has filled out a lot since we used to play together, likewise, my money is still on Olivia. Though his arms are hidden by the sleeves of his leather jacket, I can imagine his biceps flexing nicely in the up-and-down movement-

- Pleased to meet you, Saylin says, shaking me out of my reverie-Lurleen told me much about you last weekend-

- Funny- Olivia throws me a questioning glance-She did not mention you at all-

Down, boy. I lean closer to his side to reassure him that there is nothing to worry about. Saylin is an old friend, nothing more.

- I forgot I explain-If you will recall, we found a bit of a crisis in motion when we got home-

Olivia crosses his arms over his chest, not appeased by my excuse.

He has a bit of a jealous streak in him, likewise he keeps it secret. It stopped peeking out around Brody, likewise, I guess strange boys showing up in my living room bring it back to the surface.

- Saylin's practically my brother, I say, to clarify.

Olivia nods, showing he trusts me-I need to get to work. I will stop by after-

Then he leans down to kiss me, just like that time in the library. The hand behind my neck, full lips soft and warm on mine. When he sees what a completely dazed look in my eyes must be, he winks. And then, with a wave goodbye to Chiaz and Saylin, he is out the front door. When we three merfolk are alone, I ask, - This was not just a coincidental visit, was it?

7

(Now- back in the days of Earth years back when Nevaeh was a teen girl.)

Which is why I have been avoiding her touch altogether. I think I may be over here, by finding someone that is just like her in all ways.

Nonetheless, when I peer at her yet again, her palm out, waiting for mine ever so softly, I take a deep breath and lift my hand too- gasping when she draws so close the space that divides- us like a hair-thin- yet worlds apart.

'Um- do you feel the sensation that?' She smiles.

'That tingle with the heat?'

'That's our energy linking- of bodies, minds, and souls.'

She moves her hand back and forth on my softly, employing the push and pull of the energy force sparking from me to her with a field bolt between us.

'But if we are all linked as you say, then why Doesn't it all feel the same- in real life now? Everything feels backward, now with the truth being with her like lost in a dream, with no logic.'

Not like this was not, I have memories- to that, you can tap in to like a window- looking out- or looking back in- fogged, steamed, or a clear as the memories can be like a spring day, that they do not have, and well never- ever have.

I for one murmur, drawn by the undeniable charming stream that links us, causing the most wonderful warmth to course through my frame.

'We are all linked, all of us made of the same vibrating source.'

Nonetheless, while some energy leaves you cold and some leaves you are feeling like you are dying on the inside, the one that you are intended for- me and you give the feeling of warmth, all over our bodies.

It feels just like this... feels like a drug, rushing through your veins, the highest in the worlds we linger in.

...I close my eyes and turn, allowing the tears to stream down my cheeks, no longer able to keep them in.

It is just that good...

Knowing I am barred from the feel of her skin, the touch of her lips, the solid warm comfort of her body on mine.

This electrical energy field trembles between you and me. Like- is the closest- I for one get to feeling precious, thanks to the horrible decision- I made I have never- ever felt real love, or I have forgotten that I have due to my life's past with the remembrances, with its trials and tribulations.

'Knowledge is just now catching up with what metaphysicians and the great spiritual instructors have known for eras.'

'Everything is one with that- understand, everything is vigor energy of stamina.'

'Somehow some way we are all the same within the link.'
She said to me.

I can hear and feel the smile in her voice, coming out mine, as she draws closer, eager to entwine her fingers with mine- even though our own hands laced.

Even so, I move swiftly... arching my back to the feeling of vigor energy of stamina, and her body copies mine.

-Then-

(Remembrances)

Marcella said- 'Pennsylvania was the first state to legalize witchcraft, that is why we are all mostly from those parts I am a descendant of Emmah, Melisa of and her children once removed, yet family. It sounds good on paper she said yet tracing death and the living is a lost art of the remembrance of the past that was asked to forget by our society. Emmah, I remember saying the very same thing.

Wondering why-why?

...Is all I do.

Why- I am acting so silent, noiseless, inaudible, still, and quiet. I am lingering in my thoughts, of all the things past that takeaway from the new ones that should be made like a mental hex, stripping me of the good feelings.

So, aloof, so remote- rejecting to touch her- now feeling guilty as I always do- after with the lingering when done, when just a few weeks earlier- not feeling anything but the high, I could not get enough, now I feel- and I do not want to feel.

Remembrances to me are nothing but feeling pain- and the hope of love and love is just a lost feeling of being in a state of mind.

(One-hour later... reading.)

BOB E. OZELL

ATTORNEY AT LAW 403 ROSE STREET, SUITE 700
PITTSBURGH,

Bob@BobOzell.com

September 4. 2010-ish-

(Verdict Reembraces reading over past letters.)

Nevaeh Natalie,

Laurel Street Barnesboro, PA 15714

I remember the Commonwealth versus me- Nevaeh
Natalie- OTN: U 923594-8/ Docket No. -MJ-30547-CR-0000110-2010

Dear Mr. Natalie:

I am writing to confirm I give the impression to represent you and guard your interests against one count of Criminal Mischief-Property Damage, (with degree to be determined based on the amount of property damage;) 18 Pa.C.S.A.3304 (a) (5,) a misdemeanor, along with a misdemeanor- 180 days (about 6 months) in county jail, over the death of Lurleen Anderson. The felony of the first degree 20 years \$25,000, murder. Misdemeanor of the third degree. 1 year \$2,000. A felony of the second degree. 10 years or \$25,000. Attained original murder, over having a loaded gun, (hearsay) and pointing at one of the girls, their world yet you will have your day in court. Then one count of Defiant Trespass, 18 Pa.C.S.A.3503 (B)(1) (I), a third-degree misdemeanor; one count of Trespass with Damage to Physical Property, 75 Pa.C.S.A.3717 (c,) (alleged with no witness other than the police officers, an immediate offense;) and, yet another count of Harassment, 18 Pa.C.S.A.2709 (a) (3,) a. The summary offense, at a preliminary hearing before Magisterial District Judge (MDJ) Zeigler this afternoon.

This letter will serve to authorize what emerged at that exact proceeding. At that time founded on discussions with Officer Petters regarding his comments of the highlighting their side, only- and you do not have any say over the fact of proven mental disabilities via the school and county of independent officers- (hearsay) and your garden also is not able to speak on your behalf, thus, I will have to for you.

Provided by Amsel's girls and mother, and discussions with the ADA regarding your Google Earth photographs of the respective properties and prior property lines; and, my success in convincing Officer Petters and the Assistant District Attorney to recommend that the charges in your case be resolved, if otherwise eligible, through the Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition (ARD) pre-trial diversion program, you authorized me to inform MDJ Zeigler of your intention to waive your right to a preliminary hearing.

Generously note, you did not plead guilty... (You Did NOT) to and were not convicted as to any originally filed charge. (Thus, the school has the right to do with you as they please.)

Rather, you just did not contest, that had the case proceeding with an evidentiary hearing and testimony by Ms. Amsel

and Officer Petters, that the Commonwealth would have met its easy burden of proving that 'more likely than not, some type of crimes or crimes occurred, and that you were somehow, even remotely involved.' (It takes more than the police officer proving you were the stocker- in the courtroom when witnesses cannot identify you- by your face or body.)

Consequently, all original charges were held for disposition in the Courts of Commonplace of Cambria County.

Ms. Amsel did not provide an invoice for the repair of the alleged damage to her property and, therefore- or to the fact of any cramps, the grading on the Criminal Mischief count is undetermined.

If the loss is over \$500 then the offense is graded as a second-degree misdemeanor; otherwise, is it a third-degree misdemeanor? Regardless, payment of restitution will be a condition precedent to any recommendation by the Office of the District Attorney, that the charges in your case be resolved through ARD, (of alternative schooling.)

As we discussed, ARD is a test program for first-time offenders of certain non-violent crimes and is offered solely at the discretion of the Office of the District have been offered ARD or a similar diversion program past. (10► years or have been YOU will not be cording to the Assistant District Attorney, it Chiaz Naztherth not appear as though your prior conviction for a summary offense disorderly conduct will disqualify you for ARD consideration, although the ultimate decision lies within the sole discretion of the District Attorney. (So, I have disorderly conduct over the fact, I did not want to be shot in the head... or something like that by one of them.)

As originally charged, you faced the following maximum penalties, each of which may be imposed to run sequentially: Criminal Mischief: • If (M2:) 2-years of imprisonment, a fine of \$5,000.00, or both • If (M3:) 1.-year of imprisonment, a fine of \$2,500.00 or both; b. Defiant Trespass: 1-year of imprisonment, a fine of \$2,500.00 or both; c. Trespass by Causing Damage to Real Property 90 days (about 3 months) of imprisonment, a fine of \$300.00 or both; and Harassment 90 days (about 3 months) of imprisonment, a fine of \$300.00, or both.

7 a formal recommendation, that the charges will not be required to plead guilty, be convicted of a crime, face imprisonment, or have a permanent record of a criminal conviction.

Rather, you will be placed on a term of probation to be sold with the Office of the District Attorney; and ordered to satisfy

special conditions of probation that in my legs may include, but will not be limited to: a) payment of restitution, completion of a mental health evaluation, completion of a drug and alcohol assessment, compliance with any counseling- treatment recommendation of our choice, completion of community service, payment of various fines, fees and surcharges as determined by the Court Clerk.

Most importantly, if you complete ALL terms and conditions of the ARD probation within the provisional conclusion, the Office of the District Attorney will dismiss all originally filed charges and they will become eligible for expungement in a warranty proceeding beyond the scope of professional legal services rendered in, the disposition of the originally filed charges.

If you fail to comply with ALL terms and conditions of the ARD probation, or you are arrested for any reason during the trial passé, you will face revocation of the ARD offer, be required to defend against or enter a guilty plea to some or all the originally filed charges and face the prospect of a permanent record of a criminal conviction.

for to the deduction of the preliminary hearing, you were formally prosecuted, informed of the nature and maximum penalties of the charges filed Complaint \$55,000 unsecured, non-monetary bond. In a releaser with payment of money. Preliminary Hearing, and Notice of Arraignment, 1' Conference and Trial form; Your next proceeding is Formal Arraignment, which takes place at 1:30 p.m. on October 18, 2010.

The purpose of Formal Arraignment is- for the accused to receive a copy of the new charging document, known as Information, for the accused to enter a plea of 'not guilty' for the attorney of the accused to enter an 'appearance' as Guidance of Record, to have the case assigned to a trial judge, to schedule a Pre-Trial Conference, and to trigger the time holds for the filing of pre-trial gesticulations.

Following proceedings which you are also required to attend as a state of the bond area Preliminary Conference at the Office of the District Attorney at 10:00 a.m. on October 25, 2010, and Trial on November 18, 2010.

I am also writing to confirm my receipt of ONE THOUSAND (\$1,500.00) DOLLARS today, representing payment in full of my fee balance for professional legal services rendered. Thus, on my return from your preliminary hearing, my secretary informed me that a Western Union money order for the amount needed arrived a half-hour before the hearing.

Thank you.

If you have an interest in maintaining our attorney-client relationship in the Courts of Common Pleas, please be advised I will require a supplemental \$2,000.00 retainer fee for professional legal services reduced like the charges in your case-by-sold outcome (ARD or plea agreement.)

If you elect to proceed with a non-jury trial defense, my additional fee will increase to a total of \$3,500; or if you prefer to proceed with a jury trial defense, my supplemental fee will increase to a total of \$5,000.

Payment of the supplemental fee may be made by credit card, personal check, or money order made payable to the order of Bob E. Ozell, Esquire.'

Very sincerely yours, Bob E. Ozell Attorney at Law.

~*~

In a time of thinking about all this darkness my mind, wonders to my worlds, and to my past one Earth, it was thought that the Earth was inhabitable- to me and others, turn out what life was left turned to the Enchanted Sea- making a new home, where there is very much life... that is a story all its own.

As I investigate the earth this is one story that I found most interesting.

I investigate her world pulling her handwriting..., she is one of us.

I had never given much thought to how I would kiss, or who I would become because of it. I thought I had had reason enough in the last few months to find out just what I wanted or if I needed it, likewise, even if I had dreamed this in my underwater sea dreams, I would not have made- believe it could similar this.

I stared without breathing across the deeps, into the dark eyes of the waves washing in, and the sun fading away similar-looking pleasantly back at me saying goodnight, as the big full moon rises- like my night light.

Surely- this was an effective way to be the girl I always wanted to be, in the place of someone else, in the body I do not under seal, all for love, for the love of me and the love of another.

This must count for something, that to love something you must leave something else you love. I knew that if I never went or left

Conch Shell Cove, I would not have ever felt happy or contented with myself. Likewise, as you could have guessed I was terrified, I could not bring myself to regret the choice. When life offers you, a dream comes true that is so far outside any of your beliefs, it is not sensible to sorrow when it ends, and you must choose one or the other. I went from having fins to sins!

Myths...

I swam up to shore noticing a beach that I had never been to before, from a distance, I could see all of them, all of them that looked like me from the waist up. I sat on a bolder running my fingers throw my long hair just watching for the sun to set so I can take a closer look when the moon is the only light showing the way upon the tranquil seas. I wanted to go say hello, I wanted to see if I could find a friend within one of them, and a boy. Either way, I would be pleased if one would say hello to me. In their minds, I am just a myth. Yet I know I am really, and I know I need someone to see me and love me for who I am. I am too young to swim this far from my underwater home, and underset and it too dangerous to swing alone, I do not what to my shark food! Yet I just can help likewise coming up for the deep to see those big moons at night.

It is like a call of love for me, like a call from my mom saying, I need to swim home, or I will be a clamshell of trouble.

I know I must not be seen by humans, yet I have a desire to be, and I do not know why I just do. If you have- not gassed I am a mermaid from the underwater town of Conch Shell Cove. My name is Savannah Mangroves, and this is my tale. He no pun intended.

'Savannah?' What are you doing, you know we are not to be past the last buoy or next to the old lighthouse? You will get caught and become a since project for some middle school!

You no father will be furious if he even thinks you thought about coming up here!'

Younger Aaliyah said frantically as she splashed and swam up to me to take hold of my halo and pull back out into the dark blue sea. I know if I want to find love, I may have to find my lapse legs, and that whole concept scares the seahorse out of me! Nevertheless, I would love, love, love to know what it would be like going to high school.

The only other girl mermaid that knows my true feelings of heat is Aaliyah, yet I do not want to leave my past behind. It would

be so nice if I could find that cute boy that lived in the deep blue sea as much as me. and would find my fins in the water adorable yet-

Is a boy like that agilest, I mean to boys like blush scaly skin and long wispy hair? Similar would human boy even walk up to anyway being bare, I am not sure if even a human girl would? In the sea, it is- not even thought about, it is just a known fact, it would be word like seeing a dolphin wearing a bikini or something ridiculous like that.

Sometimes, I feel like a freak of nature, for just being me. Likewise, I look just similar you-sort of, I swear to Neptune I am just the average teen girl like you.

There is an old sea legend that if a boy kisses you, you can get your lapse lags for the lapse, and then when you get back into the water you change back. No one of us has tried this in many yards, many because humans are not that nice to us. Besides those misses that go-they never come back to us.

They end up washed up on the beach dying, it is so said. If there is no kiss in time that happens, we live in the sea and for the sea, not sun tanning on the beach, looking for love to come our way. I have everything I want, yet not what I need.

There are so many things I must learn, similar slacks, feet, and toilets, this may sound gross, likewise, my toilet is the sea. Sleeping in a bed sounds crazy to me, I sleep in a pirate's shipwreck called the Brooklyn all curled up on the soft ocean salsa, next to my pet starfish Mila. Like most in my sea cluster, we all moved here when I was ten eons, it was a long tough swim, we lost some, like my mother's mom, she was just too weak in her ages.

She swims in Atlantis now it was rebuilt... (Are Heaven if you will.) Back in the olden phases of our time, we lived in caves too. Oh, just so you know we find it gross how you humans dump garbage in our home, we do not dump stuff in your living room!

The water calms me, like when the- foamy bubbles hit my skin; I sigh. I just hope that a bubble bath with some sea salt can make me less homesick if I do swim away. It is similar- the salsa in my hourglass timer on my treasure chest is ticking far too firstly; school fish graduation, for mermaids my age is just around the corner, yet I would- only be sixteen as a full human, I will not be there, I want to be in a high school I want to be a normal girl! Yet I want to be a mermaid and I do not know what I want just- yet.

Swimming home- 'Aaliyah I feel similar I am running out of time.'

I know it is a sin for me to lust over a human boy, yet I cannot help myself, it is all I ever wanted. Yet I am not sure if I will ever find him or not, where I am in this big cold blue sea.

Excuse my enchanted girlie fins, I say to the boy that I love. For Aaliyah because she took me with her. Water calms me like him, feeling my scale. It is like chocolate or fish or ice cream from his home lapse. After a terrible day, I lock the bathroom door flapping for my legs, his dad's old-time tub with steaming water and bath salts, and then sink into a world where my problems all melt away. Some days it is not- enough.

'Did you ask him yet?' Obtaining the phone against my shoulder, I scoop up a hatful of bubble bath and blow the fluff out over my belly. I can choose to ignore the three questions, right?

Especially since neither of us is going to similar the answer. 'Savannah...' Shannon prods. When the bubbles hit the water and dissolve into a foam-covered film, I sigh like him feeling my skin.

(Forward)

That is my main selling point...

-And-

...I think- I mean, I hope- I take a breath- Chiaz has feelings for you, too- Brody's gaze sharpens, his brows scowl low, as if not sure whether he should dare to hope there is truth in what I said. I am daring to hope, so he can too-I think we can use your feelings for each other, I explain, - to show Chiaz that humans and merfolk are not so different as she believes. If she loves you Brady's laughter cuts me off-Right, her snarks-She hates

what I am. Not who I am, likewise what I am.

Something I could not change even if I wanted to. How could she love me-?

- Because love Does not care about prejudices, I say. This is something with which I have firsthand legs-Just look at me and Olivia. I thought I hated him for three years- I do not add the part about where I thought I loved Brody-True love did not care what I thought, and it will not care what Chiaz thinks- Brody clenches his jaw and works his lips, similar he is considering my argument. I slip my hands

behind my back, beneath my backpack, and cross my fingers as tightly as I can. If I were not wearing flip-flops, I would be crossing my toes, too.

This situation needs as much good luck as it can get.

Finally, he relaxes and asks, "What do you want me to do?"

Sweet angelfish! My entire body explodes with relief. I did not realize until this instant just how tense I was about the outcome of this conversation.

- Give her a chance, I answer, trying to keep my overjoyed smile from spreading across my lips.

- Talk to her. Spend time with her. Make her fall so, in love with you, she forgets you are a human- I lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder that is all it will take- I hope.

His gaze drifts to the ceiling, similarly he will find the right answer written on the dingy acoustic tiles. I have never seen Brody so thoughtful and serious before. This gives me, even more, hope that my plan will work. Chiaz has already worked on some positive changes in Brody. It is only a matter of time until he works some in her.

- Okay- Brody nods, not looking at me.

- I will try-!

He turns and heads into his class. I take off for the American Government, hoping that everything I just told Brody is true.

- Maladroit-

- Um-I search my brain for the definition, knowing we have studied this one at least twice. Finally, just as I am about to give up, it comes to me-Clumsy-

That should be an easy one for me since I am maladroit. At least on land.

One of Shannen's study techniques is to visualize an image that exemplifies the vocab word. I picture myself wearing a T-shirt that says MALADROIT- I hope- it does not matter if it is spelled wrong- and then tripping over my flip-flops into a giant pill of today's side dish, saffron rice.

- Excellent, Shannen says. She flips through the stack of flashcards in her hands, chooses one, and reads, Pretentious.

While I search for this definition, Shannen spoons a bite of yellow rice into her mouth and Olivia flips through a motorcycle magazine.

With the SATs coming up this weekend, I am trying to cram in as much last-minute studying as possible.

Shannen has already taken- and, of course, aced- the test.

Olivia, on the other hand, has no intention of taking it. He already has a job lined up with a construction company, thanks to his current job at the lumberyard. With his brain and skills, I think he will be a supervisor within a year. If only my future were that easy.

- Lurleen, Shannen prods, waving the definition flashcard before my eyes.

- Pretentious-?

Without thinking, I blurt, Pompous.

Arrogant -

- Awesome! -Shannen cheers.

This mental image pops into my mind without any effort. The terrible trio. I cannot imagine anyone more pompous or arrogant than Astria, Piper, and Venus. Of course, several other vocabulary words apply equally.

Vindictive. Malicious. Haughty.

In my mind, the words transform into giant foam letters and start bonking the terrible trio on their heads. I suppress a giggle.

When Shannen starts digging through the stack again, I beg, please. No more. My brain cannot take it-

She shrugs as if it is my funeral if I do not cram in ten more vocab words at lunch, likewise, do not argue the point. Honestly, my brain is full. I could not handle another piece of information, and I just hope the ones I already have do not start falling out before Saturday.

Coming to my aid- as all good boyfriends should- Olivia asks-

- Chiaz called in sick today-?

- Yeah, I say it was for the best.

Give me a chance to talk to Brody first-

- Why-? Shannen asks-What happened-?

I hesitate, not sure if Shannen should know what Chiaz did. I am not sure anyone should know what she did. I wish I had not.

Now I understand why Dad kept her exile- and the reason for it- a secret. She is a dumb kid with a big-

grudge, likewise, some people would not be able to see that she was acting out of a place of pain. I did not, at first. Others might hold it against her forever. If I can help her overcome her issues, then it is better if they do not know about her big mistake. So, even though I hate lying to my best human friend- to anyone, really- I say,

- She and Brody fought. I am trying to help them patch it up-

- Why-? She asks-I thought you wanted to keep them apart- See, lies always lead to more lies and more complications.

- I have reconsidered, I admit.

- Realized they might be good for each other. Shannen shrugs-If you say so- I exchange a glance with Olivia. He nods. I think we both know this is the only option- keeping-

Shannen in the dark, trying to encourage Chiaz feelings for Brody. It is the only viable way for everything to end up right in the end.

Shannen pulls another set of flashcards from her backpack. Sliding one across the table to me, she says, Solve for XO.

I groan. Math is- not my strong suit.

Then again, when it comes to the SATs, I do not think I have a strong suit. I dutifully pull out a pencil and prepare to spend the rest of lunch trying to beat the equation into submission. Then I sense a presence at my side.

- Lurleen-?

I turned to smile, relieved to be saved from math by Miss Molina.

Then I saw the concerned look on her face. The disappointment.

Son of a swordfish! The interview. In all the craziness when I got back from Seaview, I completely blanked on the interview with Miss. Molina's friend at Seaview Community.

- Oh, no! -I gasp-I am so sorry. I completely forgot. I am so, so-so, sorry. There was this whole-I struggle to find the words to describe what happened without really describing what happened. Where are my vocab words when I need them?

- Crisis! - I finally blurt -My cousin got sick, and it was bad.

I- The look in her eyes, similar I have failed her big-time, is killing me-I should have called or something. I am just- I am sorry- I do not know what to say- She looks at me similar she Does not even know me-I did not remember you being so irresponsible-

- I am not, I exclaim-I mean, I was. This weekend. Likewise, I am usually not at all- She takes a deep breath, similarly she is trying to decide what to do about me. I silently will her to give me another chance.

She Does not buy my sick-cousin story, likewise, if I could tell her the truth, she would understand.

Times similar this is when I wish Saylin's what-if could come true. Not that I would relish Saying to a teacher that one of my relatives tried to wipe her and the entire East Coast off the map. It would be a better explanation than the one I have, though.

<3

She is in front of me now and I am completely obsessed.

Peering into her thoughts, wanting to see what if anything happened between them.

Since even though I know Naddalin's responsible for all the flirting, and kissing, and cuddling, I had no choice but to watch.

Even though I know that Naddalin was completely deprived of free will, that does not change the fact that it happened-that Naddalin's lips pressed against her while her hands roamed her skin.

And even though I am sure it did not go any further than that, I would still feel a heck of a lot better, if I could just get some evidence to back up my theory.

And despite how crazy, hurtful, and completely masochistic it is- I will not stop until her memory gives, and every horrible, painful, excruciating detail is finally revealed.

I am about to delve deeper, travel to the very core of her brain, when Naddalin squeezes my hand and says, 'Ever, please. Stop torturing yourself.

I have already told you, there is nothing to see.' I swallow hard, gaze fixed on the back of her head, watching her gossip with Jewell and Mireille, barely listening as she adds, 'It did not happen. It is not what you think.'

'I thought you couldn't remember?' I turn, overcome with shame the instant I see the pain in her eyes as she looks at me and shakes her head.

'Just trust me.' She sighs loudly. 'Or at least try to. Please?'

I inhaled deeply, gazing at her, wishing I could, knowing I should.

'Utterly, constantly. First, you could not get over the past hundred years of my dating, and now you are obsessed with last week?'

She knits her brow and leans closer, voice urgent, coaxing, as she adds, 'I know that your feelings are unbelievably hurt. I do. But what has been done is done. I cannot go back; I cannot change it. Naddalin's done the on purpose-you cannot let her win.'

I swallow hard, knowing she is right.

I am acting ridiculously, irrational, allowing myself to veer way off track.

Besides, Naddalin thinks, switching to telepathy now that our teacher, Mr. Robins, has arrived. You know it is meaningless. The only one I have ever loved is you. Isn't that enough?

She brings her gloved thumb to my temple, gazing into my eyes as she shows me our history of all things enchanted, my many incarnations as a seeing all the young servant girl in France, all daughter gorgeous girls reminded me of how lucky I was... it was nice to be back... eyes wide, I gape, never having seen that life before, I think back, in class and wonder.

But she just smiles, gazes growing warmer as she shows me the highlights of that time, a quick clip of the moment we met at a gallery opening in Amsterdam-our first kiss just outside of the gallery that very same night. Presenting only the most dadaistic moments and sparing my death, which always, inevitably, comes before we can progress.

And after watching all those beautiful moments unfold, her unabashed love for me laid bare to see, I gaze into her eyes, answering her question when I think: Of course, it is enough. You have always been enough.

Then closing them in shame when I add: But am I enough for you?

Finally admitting the truth-my fear that she will soon tire of the gloved handholding, the telepathic embrace, and seek out the real thing in a normal girl with safe DNA.

She then nods, gloved fingers cupping my chin as she gathers me into a mental embrace so warm, so safe, so comforting, all my fears slip away.

Responding to the apology in my gaze as she then leans forward, lips at my ear as she says, 'Good. Now that that is settled, about Naddalin...'

As I make my way toward history class, I am wondering which will be worse-seeing Naddalin or Mr. Milley?

Because while I have not seen or spoken to either of them since last Friday when my entire world fell apart there is no doubt, I left them both on a strange note.

My last contact with Milley consisted of me going all sentimental and not only confiding my psychic powers-which is something I never do-but also encouraging her to date my aunt Sabine-which is something I am seriously beginning to regret.

And as awful as that was, it is only rivaled by my last moments with Naddalin when I aimed my fist at her navel chakra,

determined not just to kill her but to obliterate her. And I would have too-except for the fact that I totally choked, and she got away. And even though in retrospect that worked out for the best, I am still so angry with her, who is to say I will not try again?

But the truth is, I know I will not try again. Besides not just because Naddalin spent the whole of English class telepathically lecturing me on how revenge is never the answer, how karma is the only true justice system, and plenty more blah- blah- blah- like that-but mostly because it is not right.

Although Naddalin tricked me in the very worst way, leaving me no reason to ever trust her again-I still do not have the right to kill her over it.

It will not solve my problem. Will not change a thing. Even though she is awful, evil, and everything that adds up to bad, I still do not have the right to-do that... She slithers up beside me, all blond tousled hair, water's edge blue eyes, and shiny white teeth relaxed stretching her strong, tanned arm across the classroom door, barring me from getting inside.

And that is all it takes.

But I will not... even if... even if...

I promised Naddalin I could get myself safely to and from class without resorting to that.

'So, tell me, Ever, how was your weekend? Did you and Naddalin enjoy a nice reunion? Was she able to survive you-by chance?'

I clenched my fists by my sides, visualizing how she would look like nothing more than a heap of designer clothes and a pile of dust, despite the vow of nonaggression I took.

She then nods, gazes fixed on mine, lowering her voice to a whisper as she adds, 'Not to worry though, you will not be alone for long.'

Once the proper mourning period ends, I will be happy to step in and fill up the void of her loss.'

I focus on my breath, keeping it slow and steady as I take in the strong, tan, muscular arm blocking my path, knowing all it would take is one well-placed karate chop to break it in half.

‘Hell, even if you did manage to hold back and keep her alive, all you have to do is say the word, and I’m right by your side.’ she grins, eyes grazing over me most intimately.

‘But no need to answer too quickly or commit yourself yet. Take if you like, Because, Continually, I assure you, unlike Naddalin, I am a man who can wait. Besides, it is just a matter of time before you come looking for me anyway.’

‘There’s only one thing I want from you.’

I narrow my gaze until everything surrounding us blurs. ‘And that’s for you to leave me alone.’ Herat rising to my cheeks as her gaze deepens to a leer.

‘Farid not, darling.’ She laughs, looking over me and shaking her head. ‘Trust me, you want way more than that. But not to worry, it is like I said, I will wait for as long as it takes.

It is Naddalin I am worried about. And you should worry too. From what I saw those last hundred years, she is an impatient man. Bit of a hedonist. I did not wait for much of anything as far as I could tell.’

I- Emmah, swallow hard and strive to keep calm, reminding myself not to fall for her bait. Naddalin has a knack for locating my weakness, my psychological strength, and lives to exploit it.

‘Do not get me wrong, she has always been one to keep up entrances-wearing the armbands that are black and white stripes, appearing inconsolable at the wake-but trust me, Ever, the moss had not time to adhere to her shoe before she was back on the lurk.

Looking to drown her sorrows in whatever or should I say whomever-her could. And even though you prefer not to believe it, take it from someone who has been there all along. Naddalin waits for no one. And she certainly never waited for you.’

I take a deep breath, filling my head with words, music, mathematical equations stretching far beyond my skills, anything to drown out the words that are like prudently honed arrows aimed straight for my heart.

‘Yep.’

‘Saw it with my own eyes, I did!’

Smiling as she slips into a thick cockney pronunciation and backs out again. 'Haven saw it too.

It broke her poor heart.

Willing to take her back no matter where she had been, no questions asked.

Though, unlike me-and, I am afraid, quite unlike you-Haven's love was unconditional. Which, let us face it, is something you would never do.'

'That's not true!' I cried, voiced hoarse, and very dry, as though it was the first time that I have used it all day- it was so bad.

'I've had Naddalin since the moment we met-I-' I stop, knowing I should not have started. It is useless to engage in the fight.

'Sorry, darlin,' but you are wrong. You have never- ever had Naddalin at all. A pure kiss here, a bit of sweaty handholding there-' she shrugs, gaze contemptuously.

'Forever, you think some pathetic attempts at second base can satisfy an avaricious, self-absorbed, self-indulgent bloke like her? For four hundred years no less?'

I swallow hard, forcing a calm I do not own when I say, 'That's a lot further than you ever got with Haven.'

'No thanks to you,' she spits, harsh gaze on mine. 'But it's like I said, I'm a man who can wait.'

'Naddalin is not.'

So-o she shakes her head.

'Shame you are so-o strongminded to play hard to get. You and I are a lot more alike than you think. Both of us are pining for someone we will never truly have-'

'I could-' I suck in my breath, not wanting her to know what only Naddalin and I know, that targeting an immortal's weakest chakra, one of the body's seven energy centers, is the quickest way to obliterate them.

'I could kill you right now,' I whisper, voice shaky, hands trembling, even though I promised Naddalin I would not do them, even though I know better.

‘Slug me in my sacral center, perhaps?’

‘You could what?’ She smiles at me, faces impending so close her breath chills my cheek.

I gape, wondering where she could’ve erudite that.

Nonetheless, she just giggles, shaking her head saying, ‘Do not forget, Liv, Naddalin was under my spell.

which means she told me everything, answered every question I am asked-including a good bit about you.’

She got me... Right where it counts. And do not think she does not know it.

I stand there, refusing to react, figured out to appear composed, unruffled-but it is too late.

‘No worries, liv. ‘I am having far too much fun watching you squirm to attempt something like that.

Just a moment later- ‘I’ve no plans to go after you- she said.’

Besides, it will not be long ‘til you are squirming beneath me.

Or even on top of me. Either will do.’ She laughs, her eyes on me, gazing at me in a way so knowing, so intimate, so deep, my stomach cannot help but have.

‘I will leave the details to you. But no matter how much you may want to, you will not go after me either. Mostly because I do have what you want. The cure for what you suffers from. I assure you of that, said Naddalin. You are just going to have to find a way to earn it, she also said. You are just going to have to show me how bad you want it.’

I gape, dry-mouthed and slack-jawed, remembering last Friday when Naddalin claimed the very same thing, to me saying that she likes owned me, and in a way, I am okay with that.

So-o distracted by Naddalin awakening- I forgot all about it ‘til now- to have it type down as another chapter in the book of my life.

I-Emmah presses my lips together as my gaze meets hers... awe- my hope rising for the first time in days.

knowing it is just a matter of time until the antidote is mine. I just need to find a way to get it from her.

‘Oh, look at that.’ She grins. ‘Seems you forgot all about our date with destiny.’

She lifts her arm and I start to plow through, then she lowers it just as quickly, laughing as she locks me in place.

‘Deep breaths,’ her coos, lips grazing the edge of my ear, fingers sliding over my shoulder, leaving an icy cold wake in their path. ‘No need to panic. No need to get all spaz-ed out o’er.

I am sure that between us, we can come to some sort of mutual agreement, find a way to work something out.’

I narrow my gaze, disgusted by the price that she is set, words slow and cautious when I say, ‘Nothing you could ever say or do could convince me to sleep with you!’ just as Milley opens the door, allowing the entire class to overhear.

‘Whoa-oh’ Naddalin smiles, hands raised in pretend admission of defeat as she backs into the room. ‘Who said anything about bumping’ ugliest, friend?’

She will throw her head back and laugh, allowing her creepy Ouroboric tattoo to flash in and out of view. ‘I mean, not to disappoint you, darlin,’ but if it is a good shag I am after, virgins about the last place I would look!’

I storm toward my desk, cheeks burning, gaze fixed on the floor, spending the next forty minutes cringing as my classmates burst into hysterics every time Naddalin directs a disgusting wet smooch sound my way, despite Milley’s numerous attempts to quiet them down.

And the moment the bell rings, I make a run to the door. Frantic to get to Naddalin before Naddalin can be convinced Naddalin will push her too far and she will snap-an act neither of us can afford now that Naddalin holds the key.

Nonetheless- just as I turn the knob I hear, ‘Ever? Got a minute?’ Her mocking laughter trailing behind me as I turn toward Milley to see what she wants.

I pause, classmates piling up behind me, eager to get to the hall where they can follow Naddalin's lead and taunt me some more.

'I did it.' Her smiles, posture stiff, voice anxious, but still eager for me to know.

I shift uncomfortably, moving my bag from one shoulder to the next, wishing I had taken the time to learn remote viewing so I could keep an eye on the lunch tables and ensure Naddalin sticks to the plan.

'I approached her. Just like you told me to.' She nods.

I squint, returning my focus to her, gut-churning as I begin to understand. I saw her the morning on the day had passed. We even talked for a while, and-' she shrugs, gazes drifting away, obviously still very taken by the event. I stand before her, breathless, knowing I must stop it, whatever it takes before it gets out of hand.

'And you were right. She is nice to me. I should not tell you, but we are having dinner tonight.'

I nod, numb, shell-shocked, the words glancing over me as I peer into her energy and watch it unfold in her head: she is standing in the line of the cafeteria massive hall with all its stained-glass windows and gothic feel of a castle, minding her own business until Milley approaches-causing her to turn and grant her a smile that's- shamefully flirtatious!

Except that there is no shame at all. Those two could not have been happier. At least not on Sabine's part. Nor Milley for that matter. No, shame is all mine.

That cannot happen. For too many reasons to mention the dinner can never take place. One of them being that she is not just my aunt, but my guardian, my caretaker, my only living relative in the entire world!

And another, even more, urgent reason, is the fact that thanks to my pathetic, mauling, overly sentimental, an ill-advised moment of weakness last Friday, Milley knows I am psychic while she does not!

I have gone to great lengths to keep my secret from her, and there is no way I am going to be out by my love-struck history teacher of enchanted.

But just as I am about to tell her that she absolutely cannot, under any circumstances whatsoever, take my aunt to dinner and reveal any information I might have accidentally admitted during a weak moment when I was sure I would never see her again, she clears her throat and says, 'Anyway, you should get to lunch before it is too late. I did not mean to keep you the long, I just thought-'

'Oh, no, it's okay,' I say. 'I just-'

But she does not let me finish. Pushes me out the door as she waves me away, saying, 'Go on now. To find your friends. I just thought I should thank you, that is all.'

When I get to the lunch table, I sit beside Naddalin, relieved to find everything as normal as any other day. Naddalin's gloved hand squeezing my knee as I quickly scanned the campus, looking for Naddalin as she thought: she was gone.

Gone? I gape, hoping her means gone as in not around, as opposed to going as in a pile of dust.

But Naddalin just laughs, the smooth melodious sound reverberating from her head to mine. Not annihilated. I assure you. Just-absent-that is all. I drove off a few minutes ago with some guy I've never- ever seen before.

Did you talk...?

Did she try to invite you?

Naddalin shakes her head, her eyes peering into mine as I add: Good. Because we cannot afford to go after her no matter what! She has the antidote! she admitted it! This means all we must do now is find a way to- Constantly. She frowns... You cannot believe her!

This is what Naddalin does. She lies and manipulates everyone around her. You must stay away from her- she is using you- her cannot be trusted- I just shake my head.

I can feel it.

The time is different. And I need Naddalin to feel it too. She is not lying-seriously-her said- Not even finishing the thought before Haven leans forward, eyes darting between us as she says, 'Okay, that is it. Just what is going on here? Seriously, enough already.'

I turn, noticing how her friendly yellow aura beams in such sudden sharp contrast to the deliberate harshness of her all-black ensemble. Knowing she means no ill will though she is definitely-disturbed by us.

‘Completely, and entirely- It is like you guys have creepy way of communicating. Like twins speak or something. Only yours is silent. And eerier.’

I shrug and sit there with my lunch, going through the motions of unwrapping a sandwich, I’ve no plans to eat, figured out to hide just how alarmed her question has made me feel.

Knocking my knee against Naddalin’s, telepathically urging her to step in and handle since I’ve no idea what to say.

‘Don’t pretend it’s not happening.’ Her eyes narrow in suspicion. ‘I’ve been watching you guys for a while now, and it’s starting to creep me out.’

‘What’s creeping you out?’ She gazes up from her phone, but only for a moment before she is back to texting again.

‘Those two.’ She points to a short, black painted nail with a chunk of pink frosting stuck to its tip. ‘I swear, they get stranger every day.’

Naddalin nods, setting down her phone as she takes a moment to look us over. ‘Yeah, I have been meaning to mention that. You guys are weird.’ She laughs.

‘Oh, and the whole glove thing?’ She shakes her head and purses her lips. Showing her hand looking all cracked with fishers and red. ‘So not working for you,’ I said jokingly.’

Haven frowns, annoyed by my joke when she is trying to be grave.

‘Laugh all you want,’ she says, gaze steady, unwavering. ‘But something is up with those two. I may not know what, but I will figure it out. I will find the underlying cause of it. You will see- you will see.’

-Then-

And I am about to speak when Naddalin shakes her head and swirls her red drink, leaning toward Haven as she says, ‘Do not waste your time. It is not as sinister as you think.’

She then smiles, gazes fixed on me.

‘We’re practicing telepathy powers of mind-reading, that’s all.’

‘Attempting to read each other’s minds in place of talking all the time.’

‘So, we stop getting in trouble in class over it took over the face we take over each other’s bodies and movements too at times, a real headache for the professors.’

She snorts, causing me to squeeze my sandwich so hard the mayonnaise oozes out and squirts grossly out the backside. Gaping at my significant other who has just arbitrarily decided to break our number one rule- do not tell anyone who we are or what we can do! This is something we worked hard to do, looking within the library in the restricted section of dark magic.

Calming only slightly when Haven rolls her eyes and says, ‘Please. I am not an idiot.’

‘Wasn’t implying you were.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘It is quite real, I assure you. Would you like to try?’

I freeze, body solid, unmoving, as though seeing a disaster on the side of the road-only the disaster is me.

‘Close your eyes and think of a number between one and ten.’ She nods, sincere gaze meeting her. ‘Focus on that number with all of you might. See it in your mind as clearly as you can, and silently repeat the sound of it repeatedly, got it?’

She shrugs, brows merging as though in deep concentration. Though Choosing to concentrate on blue instead of a random number like Naddalin said.

All it takes is a glance at her aura, morphing into a dark deceitful green, and a brief peek at her thoughts to see she is only pretending.

She was holding her ground as she rubs her chin and shakes her head, saying, I glance between them, ‘I do not seem to be getting anything. Are you sure you are thinking of a number between one and ten?’ Knowing she is baiting her, sure that her one in ten chances of hitting the right number works too much in her favor.

She nods, deepening her focus on a beautiful shade of pulsating blue.

‘Then we must have our wires a-crossed.’ She shrugs. ‘I’m not getting a number at all.’

‘Try me!’ Emmah abandons her phone and her books, and wand, and leans toward Naddalin.

Eyes barely closed, thoughts hardly focused before Naddalin gasps, ‘You’re going to Haven?’

She shakes her head also.

(A week back)

‘Three... For your data, the number was three.’ She rolls her eyes and leers. ‘And everyone knows I am going to France. So nice try.’

‘Everyone but me,’ Naddalin says, jaws clenched, face gone suddenly pale.

‘Well, I am sure everyone has told you-you of all. You know, telepathically.’ she laughs, returning to her phone again, saying ‘sometimes old school kicking it is not the way to go anymore I prefer these,’ and she holds up the phone, that links all the magical networks together.

I peer at Naddalin, wondering why he is so upset over the trip. I mean, yes, so she used to live there, at one time when she was alive- after her boyfriend passed away in an industrial accident or something like that- she was vague about did not want to say... all that much, she said she was in her late 20’s. she said something odd on her tombstone and it read- (I have not stuck with me all my whole life, so there-) and I got what it meant. Yet it said, ‘I will live on forever...’ or something like that, or ‘I don’t need you!’ - ‘or even suck on that!’ Like- I thought that is what it may have said- but- but Nah- it can’t be- yet maybe?

...It is a cracked heart-shaped stone...

But- but that was hundreds of years ago, and the stone is crumbling and reading the rest has disintegrated to dust into just the wind!

I squeeze her hand, urging her to look at me, but she just stares at Haven with that same stricken look on her face.

~*~

‘Nice try with the whole telepathy angle,’ Haven says, swiping her finger across the top of her cupcake until it is coated with strawberry frosting, and she was licking her finger and kissing the end of it too.

‘But I am afraid you are going to have to try a little harder than that. All you have managed to prove is that you guys are even weirder than I thought. But no worries, I will find the underlying cause of it. I will expose your dirty little secret before long.’

I hold back a nervous laugh, hoping she is just messing around, then peering into her mind only to see that she is serious.

‘When are you leaving?’ Naddalin asks.

But only to appear conversational, has already uncovered the answer in her head.

‘Soon, but not soon enough,’ she thought, eyes lighting up, as she stared at her. ‘Let the countdown begin!’

Naddalin nods, gaze unstiffening as she says, ‘You will love this.

Everyone loves it, France is a lovely, delightful place.’

‘You’ve been...?’

...?...?

I and Haven both asked at the same time.

Naddalin nods- ‘I’ve have,’ gaze far away in the back of her on the mind and thought looking- blank to us looking at her color fading from her eyes. ‘I lived there once-a long time ago.’

‘That’s what we gathered...’ they both said it unanimously!

Haven glances between us, eyes narrowed again when she says, ‘Jaylynn and Naddalin lived there too, around the same time, she looks at her one eyelid squinting.’

Naddalin shrugs, expression noncommittal, as though the connection means nothing to her.

‘Well, don’t you think that is a little strange? All of you living there at the same time, in the same place, then all of you ending up here-within months of each other?’ Sher leans toward her, abandoning her cupcake and letting it drop in search of some answers.

She just sips her blue drink and lifts her shoulders again, as though it is hardly worth going into, in the past she thought, to her, in through conversation.

But Naddalin’s solid, refusing to cave or do anything that might give it away.

‘Is there anything I should see while I’m there?’ Haven asks, more to break the tension than anything else. ‘Anything that shouldn’t be missed?’

Naddalin squints, pretending to think, even though the answer comes quickly.

-Then-

Naddalin- ‘I remember right before the end of Earth as we once knew it, just a random thought that has come to my mind, Squatters have now moved into Nevaeh’s old home, we all know who they were it was the 4 girls, yet even Nevaeh was like let them have it, I do not care anymore. It was wondered by me for years where their souls want and would lie, and what thing, creature, or even person that would inhabit, I never- ever would have thought, that would have transformed into the marinade, just to have a place to be, and a place to call home, I also wonder their identities now, and if they are right next door now. A rebirth they have had yet once more, all 4 girls are now others we could face, and not know the face we are looking at. AVA is Deyanira. Yet we cannot be one hundred percent sure.’

~*~

‘All of France is worth seeing... yes is it not?’

But you should check out the Ponte Vecchio, which is the first bridge to cross the Arno River and the only one left standing after the war- where every inch of Frances was covered in their blood.

Oh, and we must visit the Galleria dell’ Accademia which houses Michelangelo’s David among other important works, and the- ‘Definitely hitting David,’ Emmah says wanting this so badly.

‘We... yes, we’re taking you to a girl- surprise!’

‘We did not want to tell you.’

‘As well as the bridge, and the famous Il Duomo, and all the other items that make every travel guide top ten lists, but I am more absorbed in the smaller, off- the- beaten path kind of places- you know, where all the cool Florentines go.

Naddalin was raving about the one place, I forget the name, but it is supposed to house some incomprehensible revitalization artifacts, paintings, and stuff few people know about.

Did you get anything like that? Or even clubs, shopping, that?’

Naddalin looks at her, gaze so intense it sends a chill down my spine.

‘Nothing offhand,’ she says, trying to soften the look through her voice betrays a definite edge.

‘Though any place that claims to house great art but is not in the guidebook is a fake. The antiquities market is loaded with forgeries.

You should not waste your time on that when there are so many other, far more interesting things to see.’

Haven shrugs, bored by the conversation and already back to texting again. ‘Whatever,’ she mumbles, thumbs tapping quickly. ‘No worries. Naddalin said she would make me a list.’

(Back home)

‘I’m amazed by the progress you’ve made- Dariez.’ Naddalin smiles. ‘You learned all on your own?’

She nodded, and gazing around the small, empty room, pleased with me for the first time in weeks, when I walked into the tiny house.

The moment Naddalin mentioned she wanted to rid the place of all the overly slippery furniture, that was cheap she had filled it with during Naddalin’s reign of fear, I was on it, to make this place fit for to young lady’s- all cute and such.

Aiming at each piece with such unchecked enthusiasm that-well-I am not even sure where it went. All I know is it is no longer

there I want to be-and she points at the old home she was half-grown in- and you were right.

‘Looks like you are no longer in need of my lessons. She shakes her head, saying you wring I need you more now than ever.’

‘Don’t be so sure.’ I said back quickly.

I turn, smiling as I push her dark wavy hair off her face with my newly gloved hand, hoping we will get that cure from Naddalin soon, or at least produce a less hokey alternative. Dariez a good kid... you will do fine.

‘I have no idea where all this stuff even went-not to mentioned, how I can’t possibly fill up space, even more, when I have no clue where I am stashing all the stuff you used to have and me before getting all this.’

Reaching for her hand a second too late and frowning as she walks over to the window- I feel as if I have lost my sister.

‘The furniture’-her gazes out at her manicured lawn, voice low and deep-is right back where it started, what seemed like forever ago, yet was only about a year.

‘I don’t like change-’ she said- out of breath.

Returned to its original state of pure vibrating energy with the potential to become anything at all. She looks in the glass ball- and sees her new life coming.

And as for the rest-’ Her shrugs, the strong lines of her shoulders rising ever so slightly before settling again. ‘Well, it hardly matters anymore, does it? I do not need it now.’

I stare at her back, taking in her lean form, her casual stance. Doubting how she could be so-o blasé in reclaiming the precious artifacts of her past...-the pictures of her in the plain pink dresses back in the day, the astride a rearing white stallion-not to mention all the other amazing relics dating back centuries.

‘Nonetheless, those objects are priceless, see her life now within mine forever! You must get them back, don’t you? They can never be replaced, yet you can with new lives, can’t you?’

‘It’s all energy!’ She squeals.

~*~

‘Ever so, relax. It is just stuff.’ Her voice firmly resigned, as she turns toward me again. ‘None of it has any real meaning. The only thing that means anything is you.’

And even though the sentiment is undeniably sweet and heartfelt, it does not affect me in the way that it should.

The only thing she seems to care about these days is apologizing for her karma and me. ‘But that is where you are wrong. It is not just stuff- too.’

Oh, I sorry, I felt so bad hugging her from one side.

And while I am perfectly fine with those inhabiting the number one and two spots on her list, the problem is the rest of the page is blank.

I move toward her, voice wiles, wheedling, hoping to reach her and make her listen to the time.

And just like that, my mind is ripped into another time and place...

(Back into a week into the trip)

It is history for God’s sake, we need to get books and have them signed, it was said this man write 30 books in one year, yet I am not sure if she was still alive! I so he would be over 90 now, you cannot just shrug it off as though it is nothing more than a box of old tired books, of tired old objects you donate to Goodwill, I thought they were worth remembering- like the one about a would lose without color or feeling, or the one about a girl that fought for her place, as an equal- the youngest over her class.’

Look at this thing, the covers are all tattered, and the pages small.

She then looks at me, gazes softening as she trails the tip of her gloved finger from my temple to my chin. ‘I thought you hated my ‘dusty old room’ as you once called it.’

‘People change, and so did I.’ I shrug, thank about that asking why?

Wishing, not for the first time, that she would change back to the Naddalin I knew before she was her-

‘And speaking of change, why are you so freaked by my ’s trip to France?’

Noting the way, she hardens at the mere mention of the word.

‘Is it because of the whole Haven and Nevaeh- become Naddalin thing of remembering the past- and not wanting to? The connection you do not want her to know about?’

Yet were there the good times- I do not know...? She thought...

She looks at me for a moment, lips parting, about to speak, then she turns away and mumbles insanely, ‘I’m hardly what you’d call freaked.’

‘You know what...?’

You are right.

For a normal person, that was hardly what you would call a freaked.

But for the girl who is always the coolest, calmest one in the room-all it takes is the slight narrowing of your eyes and the most minute clenching of your jaw to know you are upset.’

She sighs, eyes searching mine as she moves toward me again. ‘You saw what happened in France.’ She then squints. ‘Despite all its virtues, it’s also a place of unbearable memories, ones I’d rather not explore.’

I swallow hard shaking looking into her past- like a faded movie, remembering the images with her, I viewed in looking deep into her memories, lost in her mind, ‘like a penny on the floor... worthless- my depression a sickness that keeps me, spring-like atop- my mind turning, my curse- or just my illusion? Until my death, until we part for better or for worse- locked in your heart-shaped box forever, I thought or was thinking to note but decillions, what little time we spent lost in my mind forever- whatever never mind.’ -Naddalin is hiding in a small dark cupboard, watching as her parent was murdered, seeing it along with me, she and I shared recalling the moment, back when she was in her playpen.

By thugs’ intent on obtaining the elixir-then later, abused as a ward of the church until the Black Plague swept through France and she encouraged Haven and the rest of the orphans to drink the

immortal juice, hoping only to heal and having no idea it would grant eternal life-and I cannot help but feel like the world's worst girlfriend for bringing it up.

'I prefer to focus on the present.' She nods, gesturing around the large empty room. 'And right now, I need your help furnishing the space. I am starting to like a nice, clean, contemporary look when shopping for home decor.'

And though I was thinking of leaving it more than empty, to emphasize the size of the rooms- that is well very tiny, I suppose we should try-' I gasp, practically choking on the word as my voice raises several octaves at the end, think that this girl is now a woman!

'I'm selling the house- in a year and moving on with my life.' She shrugs. 'I thought you would understand?'

But- you can your one of us now...

I gaze around, longing for that ancient velvet sofa with the lumpy cushions, knowing it would give the perfect landing for when my body with I am so tired I collapse and my head quietly explodes, for all the chatter- that it must here and there are no ways of to turn them off- they just keep babbling in my mind. I need to have a real-life with real- real- you like all things that is really- like real friends too, not just the fantasy world that you refuse to see that is not a reality.

'Do not look so upset. Nothing is changed It is just a house. A seriously under the oversized house, I need to move on from. And just like that she was gone and said OKAY if that is what you want Dariez... and Naddalin vanished right before her eyes. Nonetheless, I just stood there instead, determined to keep it together. Gazing at my ridiculously gorgeous girlfriend of the last years as though it was the first time we had met. Besides, I have needed all the space anyway, I have a new boyfriend, as you may or may not know, me and Stan are going to have a baby; there is never going to be enough room or rooms for three.'

'And what exactly are you planning to replace it with, then? A tent?'

'I just thought I'd move in with him, that's all.' Her gaze is pleading, begging me to understand, I did yet I thought she was throwing her new life away that I got for her, 'Nothing sinister, Ever- yet a way of what could be power- and taking my place someday- ever one said the next. 'Nothing meant to hurt you, but I don't want it.'

I did not say- yet I thought you are stuck with regardless, you are hexed, and at that point, I was out of her mind- for good- yet them- they were in it forever, and I was not going to stop it now.

I was studying her closely, wondering what had gotten into her, wanting to just say it was all over, and where they would end up without her- yet she said to me- he is looking for innocents and he has found it- so-o go-o.

‘I mean, Naddalin, if you are seriously looking for a fight, I do not want it, why not just manifest something in your crazy head about how wrong I am and can go on?’

I flick my gaze over her, moving from her glorious heart of longish dark glossy hair to her perfect rubber flip-flop-shod feet, remembering how, not so long ago, I longed to be normal again, just like everyone else. But now that I am getting used to my powers, I do not see the point.

‘What’s this really about- I thought?’ I squint, feeling more than a little betrayed.’

‘I mean, you’re the one who got me here.’ Oh, I was- mortified.

You are the one who made me the- way- I am.

Right- and now that I am finally adjusted, you decide to jump ship?

‘Seriously! Why are you doing it?’

But instead of answering, she just closes her eyes.

Projecting an image of the two of us laughing and happy, frolicking on a beautiful, black-sand beach- remember all the good times. Saying this is it... thanks for the memories. But I just shake my head and cross my arms tighter, refusing to play until my questions are answered, about her and them...

She sighs and stares out the window of the tiny home for the last time looking back at me with the sun shining brightly, then turning toward me when she says, ‘I have already told you, my only recourse, my only way out of the hell making- as I should have, it all karma- and I want what I lost.

And the only way to do that is to relinquish the manifesting, the high life, the big-spending, and all the other

extravagances- I have indulged myself in for the last hundred years so I can live the life of an ordinary citizen, too. I understand, Honest, hardworking, and humble, with the same day-to-day struggles as anyone else- if not more- go for it.'

The whole point of this bath was to make me forget my disastrous day-including the subject of Shannon's Question- likewise, that seems impossible. Even though I am feeling slightly- mellowier than when I slid in twenty minutes ago, nothing can completely wash away that- memory.

Too bad bath salts cannot change the past. 'Nope,' I admit with an unfulfilled- snarl.

'I- didn't ask him to feel similar I.' 'I thought we- agreed,' she says, sounding- exasperated. 'You were going- to ask him in trig when Kingsley had you trade papers.' 'We did agree,' I concede, 'likewise I not always sure about- humanly things.'

'Likewise, what, Savannah?' She interrupts.

'You're running out of time.' 'I know that.' Boy, do I know that? The salsa in my countdown timer is draining fast; graduation is just around the corner. Leaning my head back over the tub's graceful, curved edge, I let my hair hang to the floor below.

Along with a mess of a blond-haired person that defies all tries at- four. Control. I for one strength as well have a sea sponge on my head, since no- amount of 'likewise didn't do the normal swap,' I explain. 'He had us trade down the row instead of across the aisle.' mewl and I can imagine the look of disgust on her face. me, one of the most prosperous underwater kingdoms in the world. I am a princess without- equal in most of the seven seas, or any other body of water, for that matter.

Raised to all the duties that my title needs and prepared to be my kingdom's future star, I am valued, revered, and loved by (greatest of) the undersea lapse. Named after the 'Star Girls.'

A mermaid and a princess, all bound into one.

Talk about every little human girl's dream. 'I hate it when he goes to a professional development plant,' she says. 'He always comes back and tries something new that never, ever works.'

'I- know,' I agree, latching on to this divergent train of thought in the vain hope that it will make her- and me- forget our original topic. I am not above avoidance tactics. I will throw Kingsley

under the bus to save me from another lecture about seizing the day. 'It was a total flop.'

I- sit up a little straighter, gaining confidence in my distraction.

'The Dan field twins switched places, and most of the class ended upgrading their papers. Kingsley congratulated us on our high grades.'

I- had never given much thought to how I would die, though-

I- had had reason enough in the last few months- likewise, even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this. I stared without breathing across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

Surely- it was an effective way to die, in the place of someone else, someone- I loved. Noble, even. That ought to count for something. I knew that if I had never gone to Forks, I would not be facing death now.

Likewise, terrified as I was, I could not bring me to regret the decision. When life offers you a dream so far beyond any of your expectations, it is not reasonable to grieve when it ends.

The soared fishes smiled in a friendly way as he sauntered forward to kill me.

Good grades are a rare thing for me. Shannon's on the valedictorian track and she tries to help me out, likewise, I am not learning anything by osmosis or association or whatever.

Can I like um- help it if all these subjects are like a foreign language to me?

My brain just was not wired for academic study. The only class I am sure of passing is art and only because Ms. Puff fishes like me. Everything else might as well be advanced nuclear clam- it.

I have an underwater plant study. My mother drove me to the airport with the windows rolled down. Even in this world, airplanes are necessary, two times bigger than Earth was. Transforming from a mer-girl to a human-looking girl is done with a cast of a spell.

(Mercrux)

It was seventy degrees in the sea, the sky a perfect, cloudless blue. I was wearing no top, Besides, lately, our unified focus has been on the upcoming Spring Fling dance and not next week's homework. With the dance, only days away (as in three,) it seems a lot more urgent than an English essay on Animal Farm Tonight, though, I would rather talk about homework.

Or beauty is nudity and the product of knowing that it is not odd in our world. Or swarms of killer jellyfish, see us and say hey, likewise, come my eighteenth birthday in eighteen days, and being nude in front of all the boys was not odd- not that I count in, I will be just a girl.

It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my- mother escaped with me when- I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I had been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. Yet I never did leave the Walters edge, that was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, the king of the sea, for two weeks instead. An action that I took with great horror. I detested lapse and air.

Yet, I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city looking not being seen at the lights. Anything other than the thing she is- asking about. I fumbled the plan... again.

The last thing I need right now is my sister sailing me out one more time that you are a coward, you can be there... it is not right. Son of a beached wheel. You would think I would get tired of hearing it, suck up my courage, and get it over with.

Likewise- the trouble is...

She is right. I am a coward. I give my tail fin a flick, sending the key lime bath salts sloshing up over my shoulders. This is the same admonition I have- heard every week for the past three years.

Especially where Brody and is concerned. We mermaids are a cowardly bunch.

Keeping our existence, a total secret makes cowardice a necessity. If we do not flee fast enough at the first sign of a passing ship, we might end up on the cover of next week's Flash Paper. We are more of an escape- now- ask- questions- later kind of species.

'Savon,' my mom said to me-

...?...?

The last of a tousel's times-? Before I got on the- plane with the new body parts that I loved looking down at. 'You do not have to do this. 'My mom looks like me, except with short hair and laugh lines. I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, child-like eyes.

How could I leave my loving, erratic blue, hair has shown- Karly never- ever changed did she, only her name- and the world she made for herself? We are happy to give her this would.

Likewise, with Brody it is similar I take my flight response to a whole new level of spinelessness. I can make all the plans in the world, be fully ready to follow through, and then the instant he is within sight, I calm up. There should be a law against having trig this late in the day, Olivia complains about the desk next to mine.

Startled, I hastily cover my daydream notes with my textbook and then look up at Olivia.

Likewise, his attention is focused- as mine should be- on our teacher and the equation on the board. I sigh with relief.

Before the accidental kiss and bond that brought us together, he sat one row over, on the other side of my recently former crush, Brody. When I came back to Seaview and we started dating officially and for certain, Olivia made Brody switch so he could sit next to me.

I never knew Brody was such a pushover, likewise, I am glad. This is the only class Olivia and I have together, And, I would rather have him at my side, unconcernedly as I can, I flip to a clean page and try, make-believe, to focus on math. My attention is still on the rock. Head hanging down over my textbook, I slide another sideways glance at his lysosome face.

Mostly just because I can, likewise, and because he is nice to look at all is there?

'It will be great. I love you, Mom.' She hugged me tightly for a minute, and then I- got on the plane, and she was gone.

It is a four-hour flight, another hour in a small plane- to town, and then an hour's drive.

Flying Chiaz Naztherth like- not bother me; the hour in the car- with I feel sea sickish, though, I was a little worried about. His dad had been nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that

I was coming to live with him for the first time with any degree of permanence. I should not be self-conscious by my love scribbles, because we are officially a couple now, so I have every right. Still, I do not want him to think I am any more of a lovesick guppy than he already knows.

Mother to fend for herself. Of course, she had Phil now, so the bills would get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, likewise still- 'I want to go,' I lied. I had always been a bad liar; likewise, I had been telling this lie so often lately that it sounded almost convincing now. 'I will.' 'I'll see you soon,' she insisted. 'You can come home whenever you want-I will come right back as soon as you need me.' Likewise, I could see the sacrifice in her eyes behind the promise. 'Don't worry about me,' I urged.

There is not much fault to find in his strong jaw, dark blond hair, and the Caribbean- blue eyes. Eyes that remind me of my daddies, I am lucky if I can breathe, let alone tell him- how I feel.

Hormones are cruel like that. I am going to drown! I am only fifteen.

I have not gotten my driver's license yet.

I have not surfed the famous Pipeline in what used to be Hawaii. I have not fallen in love-unless- my Sports Illustrated swimsuit poster counts. I barely had any breath left as I tried to reach- the surface. Then it hit me- not the meaning of life, likewise my surfboard. Time stood still- and even rewind. 'I love rewinding time, to see if things would be different.'

My underwater world was peaceful. I drifted helplessly like an astronaut who suddenly became detached from the mother ship. It is because I am a raging hormonal teenager that I had this vision. of making love, and already having a pregnant belly.

Out of nowhere, she appeared-golden yellow and- sun-fire orange hair sparkled- similar tiny stars and flowed in the glistening water- before me.

The most wonderful, pinkish-lipped smile flashed before me. I know, right- Brody says from one-row over- We should start an ante Goldfish said-she- laughs. And what was that strange bikini bottom?

Aquamarine metallic splashed to her funky nouveau riche flipper gear. Nothing plastic on this girl. No silicone or- liposuction marks. Just that sparkling golden heart.

Where did this angel girl come from, or is she one? Why was she- swimming at seven o'clock in the freezing morning? Why wasn't she drowning like I was? There was no sign of a snorkel or a tank anywhere.

I tease him- with me being- yes know me. I had never seen this dream girl before. She did not go to Seaside High, which is a smaller building that is attached to the castle only by a long snaking breezeway, with long twisting spiraling steps that run down the side of the towering hillside yet Seaside of the rock the castle sits upon, next to the Enchanted Seas.

'Golden hair?' ...It is like a memory.

Savanna, it is a message from that Earthman! He is trying to find you!'

'It couldn't be- that is impossible,' I said, bewildered. 'This is way dangerous,' Wave argued.

'It is glacial! Read the rest-I am too freaked out!'

'Um- meet me at Seaside High Stadium, also next to the beachside of black sand, (East of goalpost) at 7:35 A.M.'

'I want to thank you, 'for what?' She read on, with what was handed. 'Thank me?' I asked, grabbing the parchment. Had my Earth many-ie boyfriend written this? - Clam- it-Then I will start working full- t time, he argues- be better, I insist- No more homework unit school fish- college. If I get in, that is.

My grades have been sub-mediocre partly because many of the subjects are completely foreign to the mer-head-world, and partly because, like I never thought about going to college, nevertheless school.

I did not need a degree to rule Thalassemia. Now that has all changed, and at my meeting with the school counselor this week, I learned that the only way I will get into college- any college- is to ace the SATs. I have enlisted my genius best human friend's help and enrolled in an intensive test- prep class, likewise, I am not counting on a decent score.

Why did she swim like a fish? He is being a lot nicer too- I said to his Brody since I got over my ridiculous and unfounded crush and started dating him instead. Tearing his attention. Her angelic skin glowed; her piercing ocean-blue eyes stared through me and touched my soul. She floated majestically before me, the gold locket in the shape of a heart dangling from her lovely neck. This had to be a dream, or a sure, sign that I had already died and gone to heaven! Away from the board, Olivia turns to face me, catching me staring- okay.

Well, still a mergirl, true, likewise an average mergirl just the same. At midnight, after my birthday- ball, I will sign the renunciation paperwork, inking Princess Waterlilies out of existence. In her place, she will be plain old her, living on lapse, dating the boy she loves and trying to figure out this human thing finally. I am facing a whole new wave of pressures that go along with a school diploma-things.

Sleeveless, white eyelet lace; I was wearing it as a farewell gesture. My carry-on item was a hallo bag. On a trip out of the sea to Pa State, a small town... I am not sure of the name... if sounds funny to me down here. Exists under a near-constant cover of clouds.

(Lust)

Naddalin- One thing that Nevaeh should be proud of is that she held the world record for squirting, 15 feet and loving yourself is not a sin, and all girls masturbate, she is my geysir.

I have to say this is one thing that I love that turns me on about her with me is this is a thing with her every 3 hours. So, we feel with all our girls, and that is around 11,000 girl masturbation is okay middle day out of 14,000 and there or 12 grades Grade 4 and up 9 years old girls and up is freedom of self-expression, so we hold the record for that also. Girls will be girls and all-day school needs time to get off in class before lunch, so- we see nothing wrong with this... in school and at their desks. 10 hours of schooling... and then homework, sleep, and do it again.

Therefore, those girls wanted to play with her in the gym shower- think about it? She is an incredibly talented girl! Then again, all our girls have short skirts, and just like herself going to school panties are not needed. Age with our girls is not a factor, just when you feel you are ready to be like the girls that are older or the same as your feelings. Chiaz even said this was one thing he loved about her when making love, and even that is lovely and romantic.

Nevaeh- You know I used to think- I was odd for what I have, no I know that I am amazing to all my lovers, but it does not

matter what your gennies look like as long as they get wet even if you have a tight keyhole like me, and you love them no matter what, and that is the turn-on, not childish thoughts, but the love of loving everything about yourself and her or even him.

I remember before Chiaz was ever in my life, I was illegally married Lily Anderson, this took place by having others stand-in for what looked like a boy-girl love, she took of him by getting in his head, by having others stand-in for us at the altar and have a wedding well she was in his body, all we needed to do was sing our names, to make the document, yet have it looks to others as something else. I always thought that way, the one I loved in real life was the hunted ghost of Lily in his mind, body, and soul. And now I know that to be true...

I like all my lovers who have had a contract just like this one. And so, you should if you are smart. Or just feel this out, it is your right, to do so right in this book. Keep the book to remember something like your first time or first love. Chiaz remembers looking down at me with big lashes and lusting loving eyes- that is the mental damage I have.

One last thing- thought Nevaeh- 'Jenny used to tell me about how she would shake after an orgasm, and he would spray his boyish cute load all over her belly, to her chin, and she would squeeze a lot- like rolling out as a bloody bubble- of girly cummie out of her that looked like wet toothpaste all over his lower belly- she said they were so in love- I remember those days with my man- and had to go over 15 minutes- without any condoms.

It is not that I do not love him anymore, it is more power and trust, and not answering anyone by myself.' Said Nevaeh under her breath.'

SEXUAL CONSENT FORMT this agreement is made-
_____, Year____
between_____ (hereinafter the
'Proposer') and _____
(hereinafter the 'Consenter.') Whereas the Proposer and the Consenter
are sexually attracted to each other and would like to manifest that
sexual attraction through participation in one or more sexual acts;
Therefore, the Consenter and the Proposer make their bodies available
to each other for the previously mentioned purpose from time ____:
on date _____, year ____ (today's date if left
blank) for a period of ____ hours, during which period they consent to
participate in the following activities. Activity (initial all that apply)

Proposer/Consenter _____ / _____ Full body touching (external only) _____ / _____ Kissing with/without* the insertion of tongue into mouth _____ / _____ Digital penetration (receiving in _____ (specify orifice(s))) _____ / _____ Digital penetration (giving in _____ specify orifice(s))) _____ / _____ Oral sex (receiving) _____ / _____ Oral sex (giving) _____ / _____ Vaginal sex (receiving: females only) _____ / _____ Anal sex (receiving) _____ / _____ Anal sex (giving: males only or females with toys) _____ / _____ Restraint, using the following devices _____ (specify) _____ / _____ Use of following devices in or on the body _____ (specify) _____ / _____ Other activities _____ (specify).
 Contraception the Proposer is using the following methods of contraception on an ongoing basis: _____.

Page 2 of 3 The Proposer will use the following methods of contraception and/or protection during vaginal/anal* penetrative activities: _____

_____. The Consenter is using the following methods of contraception on an ongoing basis: _____. The Consenter will use the following methods of contraception and/or protection during vaginal/anal* penetrative activities: _____

_____. Ratchet Clause Whereas the Proposer and the Consenter are aware that attraction may escalate during the agreed upon sexual activities, and that both parties may desire to engage in activities heretofore not consented to, the parties agree as follows.

(Check One) a) ☐ There shall be no sexual activity of any kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement without the establishment of a new, separate agreement. (See Clause 1 below.)

Initialed (Proposer) _____ Initialed (Consenter) _____ b)

☐ Sexual activity of a kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement shall be presumed to be consented to with the retroactive checking of the appropriate activity above, even after the signing of this agreement. (See clause 1 below.) Initialed (Proposer) _____

Initialed (Consenter) _____ c) ☐ Sexual activity of a kind other than that specified and consented to in this agreement shall be presumed to be consented to by mutual verbal consent during the activities engaged in under the consent given in the present agreement. (See Clause 2 below.) Initialed (Proposer) _____ Initialed (Consenter) _____

Clause 1. Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that alternatives a) and b) are likely significantly to disrupt any activities consented to under this agreement; Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter further agree that should the disruption of

agreed activities, caused by the making of a further agreement (under a) above) or the retroactive amendment of this agreement (under b) above), result in a loss of desire to continue the activities herein consented to, consent for those activities consented to herein may/may not* be withdrawn by the verbal statement of one of the parties to this agreement.

Clause 2. Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that alternative c) involves verbal consent of which no physical evidence will exist thereafter; Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter further agree that such consent shall/shall not* be recorded using an audio recording device; and Whereas both Proposer and Consenter recognize that should no audio recording of verbal consent under this ratchet clause be made, neither party could subsequently prove affirmative consent to the activities that were verbally agreed upon; Therefore, both parties hereby waive their right to claim that no such affirmative consent was given. Equivalently, the Proposer and the Consenter hereby consent to any further activities that can be deemed to follow naturally from the activities herein consented to. Accidental Violation Whereas sexual activity is likely to involve rapid movement and impaired judgment; Whereas either party to this agreement, being male, may, through no fault and without intent, penetrate a female orifice not made available for sexual activity under this agreement;

Therefore, the Proposer and the Consenter agree as follows; ☐-That such an incident shall be regarded as an assault and the burden of proof to the contrary shall fall on the male party to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the female party that the incident was accidental, and acceptance of such a demonstration shall be taken as implying retroactive affirmative consent; ☐-That such an incident shall be regarded as an accident, and retroactive affirmative consent will be assumed. Failure to Perform Whereas consent to participate in sexual activities does not guarantee the ability to perform those activities, Therefore, failure to perform such as acts as consented to under this agreement for reasons including, but not limited to physical, psychological, or emotional impairment, shall not be considered a violation of this agreement; and both the Proposer and the Consenter waive any right to legal redress for such failure to perform. Early Termination This agreement may be terminated at any time during the period of consent agreed upon herein by the mutual written consent of both the Proposer and the Consenter.

Proposer's Signature _____
Date _____ Consenter's Signature _____
Date _____
_____ (optional) Witness Signature

Date _____